

## MEANING AND MEASUREMENT IN CROSS-NATIONAL RESEARCH ON SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY

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**Abstract** The stability of a democratic nation has long been thought to rest on its level of legitimacy among the mass public. Yet, measurement of such support has been characterized by considerable confusion. One key element in that confusion is the heavy reliance over the past 20 years on data from a survey item that measures respondents' levels of satisfaction with democracy. Data from this item have been analyzed in numerous studies of political support. This research has proceeded despite the existence of substantial disagreement regarding what dimension or dimensions of support the item measures. In an effort to resolve this ambiguity, we examine the conceptual and empirical properties of the item in question. The analysis draws on original surveys conducted in 1999 in Romania and El Salvador and on data from the 1997 Latinbarometer. Results reveal that the satisfaction with democracy item taps multiple dimensions of political support and that the substantive content represented by the item varies across both individuals and nations. We argue that these empirical characteristics limit the capacity of analysts to derive meaningful inferences from study of this item and that, until clarification of the measurement issue is obtained, progress in identifying predictors of democratic stability will be slowed.

Improving our understanding of political support constitutes one of the central tasks facing students of comparative politics. Much of the research on support makes use of a survey item that has appeared on the Eurobarometer, the Latinbarometer, and elsewhere. In this article, we examine the conceptual and empirical properties of this "satisfaction with democracy" (SWD) question. The SWD question asks, "On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied,

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not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?" Although many scholars have made use of SWD, no consensus exists regarding what dimension or dimensions of political support SWD represents. We seek to resolve this ambiguity.

At issue is whether SWD functions as a valid indicator of any dimension of political support. In approaching this question, we first review past uses of SWD. We next consider how survey respondents may interpret the question, and what those interpretations might imply for the study of political support. Following this two-part assessment, we conduct a series of empirical tests that seek to identify the dimension or dimensions of political support tapped by SWD and to determine if the substantive content represented by SWD is constant across observations.

This exercise is important on two levels. First, given the centrality of SWD to recent research on political support, it is vital that the item's characteristics be understood. Meaningful progress cannot occur if confusion persists regarding key empirical indicators. Second, getting the details right may have a direct impact on discussions of public policy. For instance, the Inter-American Development Bank recently issued two reports concerning levels of satisfaction with democracy in Latin America and how policy failures may fuel public dissatisfaction (see Latin American Economic Policies 2000a, 2000b). Both reports use the SWD item. Policy analyses such as these risk offering misdiagnoses when conclusions hinge on ambiguous data.

### Previous Research on Satisfaction with Democracy

Collectively, research on SWD exhibits a striking lack of consensus as to what it is that the SWD item measures. We have identified five distinct views regarding the substantive and theoretical meaning of SWD.

1. *The SWD item as an indicator of support for incumbent authorities.* Several scholars have argued that SWD measures support for incumbent authorities or the related concept of specific support (e.g., Dalton 1999; Merkl 1988; Schmitt 1983). The central contentions of this school are that SWD emphasizes the performance of government (Dalton 1999) and that the item has "strong policy overtones" (Merkl 1988, p. 29). This perspective assumes that the phrase "how democracy works" cues survey respondents to contemplate the outputs of incumbent authorities. Use of SWD as an indicator of support for authorities has been justified solely on the basis of reference to the item's wording; we have located no empirical tests offered as evidence of the validity of SWD as a measure of support for incumbent officials.

2. *The SWD item as an indicator of system support.* System support refers to satisfaction with a nation's system of government—political institutions, constitutional structure, and so on—irrespective of views regarding incumbent

political authorities (Easton 1965).<sup>1</sup> The SWD item has most commonly been used as a measure of system support (e.g., Anderson and Guillory 1997; Fuchs 1993, 1999; Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson 1995; Harmel and Robertson 1986; Klingemann 1999; Lockerbie 1993; McDonough, Barnes, and López Pina 1986; Morlini and Tarchi 1996; Toka 1995; Weil 1989; Widmaier 1988, 1990).

Proponents of SWD as an indicator of system support dismiss the possibility that the item taps support for authorities by noting that SWD includes no mention of political leaders, parties, or policies (Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson 1995; Lockerbie 1993; Toka 1995). For instance, Lockerbie (1993, p. 282) argues that SWD "clearly asks the respondents to evaluate the political regime rather than particular individuals or party(ies) holding power." Some authors in this school concede that SWD prompts evaluations of system outputs but suggest that this means that the item taps system support at a "low level of generalization" (Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson 1995, p. 330; see also Anderson and Guillory 1997, p. 70).

Klingemann (1999) reports data regarding the validity of SWD as an indicator of system support, but the evidence is too mixed to be viewed as definitive. First, SWD and Klingemann's four-item regime performance scale are correlated at a level of 0.46, a mark that is at once too high and too low to resolve how SWD relates to system support. At this level of correlation, we can rule out the possibility that SWD and system support are unrelated, yet we cannot conclude that the two are one and the same. Second, at least one item in Klingemann's regime performance scale may tap support for incumbent authorities.<sup>2</sup> If the scale mixes distinct considerations, the effect could be either to inflate or to deflate the correlation with SWD depending upon which level of support SWD represents.

Anderson and Guillory (1997, p. 70) draw on research by Clarke and Kornberg to justify use of SWD to represent system support: "Clarke and Kornberg [1992, p. 47, n. 24] and Kornberg and Clarke [1992, pp. 114–16, 1994] report on a variety of tests designed to establish construct validity of the satisfaction with democracy question as an indicator of system support. They find that satisfaction with democracy is clearly an indicator of actual

1. Many scholars have noted that diffuse support is difficult to operationalize unambiguously. To avoid this controversy, we focus on system support rather than diffuse support. This means that we define support in terms of the object under consideration (see also Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson 1995). With specific support, the object of support is incumbent political authorities, and those authorities' policy actions. With system support, the object is democracy as it has been implemented within a particular nation (e.g., the constitution, political institutions, and electoral formula).

2. The item is "How satisfied are you with how the people now in national office are handling the country's affairs?" (Klingemann 1999, p. 36). We base our interpretation on the item's wording, which we read as unequivocal in its focus on incumbent authorities. Klingemann reports evidence that this item loads on the same factor as the other three items in the regime performance scale (although it produces the weakest factor loading) and that the item is correlated at 0.32 or greater with each of the other three items.

system support and not coterminous with support for the incumbent government." We disagree with this interpretation of Clarke and Kornberg's findings. First, neither of the passages from 1992 includes analysis of SWD; instead, both focus on feeling thermometers. Clarke and Kornberg make no claim in these works to be testing the validity of SWD, and the SWD question is not part of their analysis. Second, Kornberg and Clarke (1994) report that SWD has interfactor correlations of equal magnitude with support for authorities (0.35), with their two system support factors, parliament-civil service (0.36) and judiciary (0.28), and with support for the community (0.30). In interpreting these results, Kornberg and Clarke (1994; Clarke, Dutt, and Kornberg 1993) explicitly reject the notion that SWD constitutes a pure measure of system support.

Fuchs (1993, p. 240) argues that because SWD asks about the functioning of democracy, the item "refers to the informal structure of the regime; in the generalization hierarchy it is between attitudes in respect to the formal structure and those in respect to the authorities." In support of this claim, Fuchs shows that SWD is correlated with items that tap attitudes regarding the formal structure (0.49) and incumbent authorities (0.50). Fuchs's view is that these results imply that SWD represents a construct that occupies ground between the two diagnostic variables. This is plausible, but at least one alternate also is consistent with the observed pattern: SWD may tap multiple levels of political support. Rather than capturing a point between formal structure and incumbent authorities, the item may capture several adjoining points on Fuchs's generalization hierarchy. In this case, SWD would not be a valid indicator of any single level of political support, although the item may function as a summary measure that captures support at multiple levels. This perspective has been advanced by Kornberg and Clarke.

3. *The SWD item as a summary indicator.* Clarke, Dutt, and Kornberg (1993) find that SWD is equally correlated with support for the political community, the regime, and incumbent authorities. The authors interpret this as evidence that SWD "provides a useful overall summary measure of satisfaction with existing democratic political systems" (1993, p. 1003). The unit of analysis in these studies is the individual, which suggests that SWD is a summary indicator of individual-level satisfaction. It follows that, when answering this question, the respondent is influenced by a mix of considerations (i.e., thoughts concerning the community, the nation's political system, and incumbent leaders). If this view is correct, then past uses of SWD to represent support for authorities and system support are neither fully right nor fully wrong. Instead, these two levels of support both would be components of satisfaction with democracy.

4. *Acceptable ambiguity.* Several analysts have justified study of SWD on the grounds that the item has been asked frequently, facilitating analysis that would be impossible were we forced to hold out for better data (e.g., Fuchs 1999; Kaase 1988). Other authors have avoided the issue of substantive content

by reporting SWD data without commenting on what it is the item is presumed to measure (Dogan 1997; Lagos 1997; Turner and Martz 1997). Kaase dismisses concern with SWD by arguing that "there is little point in deploring conceptual and operational ambiguities in the wording of the questions. Whatever the data measure, it is interesting to look at the results in longitudinal perspective" (1988, p. 120). The view defended by Kaase is, in essence, that we should shoot first and ask questions later. Given that substantial disagreement exists regarding what it is that SWD measures, we find this position to be untenable.

5. *Unacceptable ambiguity.* In contrast with the above perspective, Norris (1999b) and Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer (1998) suggest that the ambiguity inherent in the SWD question is sufficiently troubling that use of the item should be avoided. Norris argues against SWD on two levels: that the item may mean different things to different respondents (which implicitly confounds efforts to use the data to support comparisons across either individuals or nations) and that the item is intrinsically value laden. As an alternate indicator of system support, Norris advocates use of a scale that combines data on confidence in various political and civic institutions. Rose and his colleagues challenge SWD on the grounds that respondents may vary in the standards they apply when gauging satisfaction.<sup>3</sup> To avoid this problem, Rose and his colleagues argue that support is best measured using a multi-item battery in which the word "democracy" is deliberately avoided (1998, p. 104).

*Summary of prior research.* This brief review of past uses of SWD has identified considerable ambiguity and contradiction. The first two schools—scholars who hold that SWD measures support for authorities, not system support, and those who believe the exact opposite—appear to be irreconcilable. Empirical evidence is consistent with the third perspective, Clark and Kornberg's suggestion that SWD constitutes a summary indicator of political support. This view requires additional assessment, though, especially given the possibility identified by Norris, and by Rose and colleagues, that SWD may mean different things to different respondents. Some authors have advocated that we overlook doubts regarding the precise meaning of SWD. We see this as an unacceptable strategy: if SWD does function as a valid indicator of some aspect of political support, then students of support are better off knowing so; conversely, if SWD is severely flawed, then we are better off knowing this as well, so that attention can be directed to the design of superior indicators.

3. Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer's (1998) discussion concerns both the SWD item under consideration here and a variant of the item asked in new democracies that refers to satisfaction with "the way democracy is developing in our country."

## Analytical Assessment of Satisfaction with Democracy

Although scholars often disagree regarding the meaning of survey items, dispute of the magnitude seen with SWD is rare. This lack of consensus presumably originates in ambiguity in the wording of the SWD item.<sup>4</sup> As outside observers to this dispute, it is not obvious to us that any of the leading schools of thought is clearly correct or incorrect. That is, we see multiple plausible interpretations regarding what construct SWD taps.

When survey respondents are asked to evaluate "the way democracy works," they are implicitly required to contrast the actual nature of democracy with some standard of performance. Ambiguity in the meaning of SWD stems from the fact that the question omits reference to any basis of comparison. Respondents are left on their own. This is not the case with many other survey questions. Instead, survey questions often inform respondents not only of what it is they are to evaluate, but also of how those evaluations are to be constructed. For instance, retrospective economic perceptions typically are measured by asking respondents to compare the state of the family's finances (or of the national economy) today with 1 year ago. The SWD item suggests no comparable frame of reference.

Survey respondents may interpret the SWD item as asking them to evaluate the way democracy works today with how it worked under the leadership of a previous government: "How satisfied am I with the way democracy works? Well, I'm a lot more satisfied today with the Blue Party than I was five years ago with the Yellows." Under this interpretation, SWD measures support for incumbent authorities. But respondents also may assume that SWD concerns how democracy does work as opposed to how it could work under an alternate institutional or constitutional design: "I think things would be a lot better if judges were elected instead of appointed." Here, SWD taps system support because the respondent's answer signals an assessment of the nation's institutional structure.

Several scholars have noted that attitudes regarding democracy as a form of government constitute an important component of political support (Canache 2001; Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson 1995; Norris 1999a).<sup>5</sup> With respect to SWD, this focus on abstract support for democracy raises the possibility that respondents—particularly those in democratizing societies—may interpret SWD as asking them to contrast democracy with an alternate form

4. We should note that our concern with ambiguity in the meaning of SWD is not shared by all analysts. For instance, in one recent treatment the authors referred to SWD as a "straight-forward" question, and offered no comment on the continuing debate regarding what it is that the item measures (Bratton and Mattes 2001, p. 460).

5. Attitudes regarding democracy as a general form of government are distinct from, and more general than, system support. System support concerns attitudes regarding the particular variant of democracy that exists within one's country. Support for democracy as a form of government concerns democracy in the abstract. We will see below that these attitudes are both conceptually and empirically distinct.

of government: "How satisfied am I with the way democracy works? Under communism, at least everyone had a job!"<sup>6</sup> To our knowledge, only Norris (1999b) has recognized that SWD may tap support for democracy as a general form of government. Lockerbie (1993, p. 282) explicitly rejects this interpretation by noting that "being dissatisfied with [the] way in which democracy is working [in] one's country does not mean that one wants to overthrow democracy and have another form of government." What Lockerbie overlooks is that being dissatisfied with the way democracy is working may mean that one does, in fact, wish to see democracy replaced with an alternate system. Likewise, being satisfied with the way democracy is working may mean that the respondent prefers today's democracy to yesterday's authoritarian regime.

Depending on what standard of judgment is used, SWD may measure support for authorities, system support, or support for democracy as a general form of government. Hence, absent empirical evidence, we cannot be confident that survey respondents and scholars interpret SWD comparably. Indeed, given the mutually exclusive interpretations previous scholars have offered regarding the meaning of SWD, it is not possible that all uses of SWD have been appropriate.

Unlike writers who have addressed the question of validity analytically rather than empirically, Clarke, Dutt, and Kornberg (1993) present evidence that SWD is equally correlated with three distinct dimensions of political support: support for the community, support for the regime, and support for incumbent authorities. As noted above, Clarke and his colleagues interpret these data as meaning that SWD constitutes a summary indicator of political support. This is a plausible interpretation. But if this view is correct, then it speaks against the validity of SWD as an indicator of any single dimension of support. Validity presupposes not only that the indicator measures the construct in question, but also that it measures only that construct. This second requirement is not met if SWD functions as a summary indicator of multiple dimensions of political support.

Upon finding that SWD is equally correlated with three levels of support, Clarke and his colleagues assume that the item prompts survey respondents to contemplate each of those levels at once and to offer a judgment that reflects the resulting mix of considerations. An alternate hypothesis is that SWD is equally correlated with several measures of support because some respondents interpret the item one way, others interpret it a second way, and still others a third way. This possibility—that SWD means fundamentally different things to different people—would severely jeopardize our capacity to derive valid inferences from comparisons made using data on SWD.

As a single-item subjective indicator, SWD has much in common with more familiar measures of life satisfaction. Life satisfaction items tap a respondent's

6. This is an actual quote from a 19-year-old man in Slovakia from a conversation with one of the authors in 1994.

subjective well-being (SWB). Judgments of SWB, which are presumed to provide summary measures that capture a wide array of considerations, have been studied extensively by researchers in the field of psychology (see Schwarz and Strack 1999 for a detailed review). Collectively, this research establishes that the considerations that influence reports of SWB vary widely depending on what information is accessible to the respondent. As a result, data on SWB are highly unreliable, because the process by which an individual derives a response is dependent on the precise context in which the question was asked. Using research on SWB as a guideline, four concerns with SWD warrant attention.

First, the interpretation of SWD may vary as a function of individual-level traits. In the laboratory, Strack, Schwartz, and Gschneidinger (1985) manipulated subjects' style of thinking and, by doing so, altered judgments of well-being. Similarly, in survey research it may be the case that the interpretation of SWD varies systematically across respondents. For example, if men tend to view the item in terms of the political system, whereas women tend to view it in terms of incumbent political authorities, then comparing the opinions of men and women would be meaningless. Any model in which the dependent variable is individual-level SWD is suspect because the effects of independent variables may stem from systematic differences in interpretation of the survey item rather than from true variance with respect to a commonly understood underlying construct.

Second, the interpretation of SWD may vary across nations (Widmaier 1988, 1990). Kuechler (1991, p. 281) has issued a strong warning on this point, noting that "it is quite conceivable that the question wording does not constitute the same stimulus in all participating nations. . . . A comparison of national marginal distributions is not meaningful." If the meaning of SWD does vary across nations, then it follows, as Kuechler rightly notes, that cross-national comparison of SWD is risky. Suppose that we have data from two nations. In both, 80 percent of citizens support the political system, and 50 percent support the incumbent government. That is, in actuality there is no difference in political support between the two nations. If respondents in the first nation predominantly answer SWD as a system support measure and respondents in the second nation answer it as a support for authorities measure, then the observed cross-national variance in democratic satisfaction would be nothing more than an artifact of ambiguous phrasing.

Third, SWD may measure different things at different points in time. Research on media effects teaches us that the considerations that inform political judgments can be altered through priming (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990). When foreign policy is salient, we evaluate the president on the basis of his handling of foreign policy; when the economy is salient, it is opinion about the economy that drives presidential approval. At the individual level, research on SWB demonstrates that life satisfaction items have low test-retest reliability, partly because idiosyncratic changes in a re-



spendent's mood can produce profound shifts in that person's response (Schwarz and Strack 1999; Schwarz et al. 1987). Comparable dynamics may be at work with SWD. Clarke, Dutt, and Kornberg (1993) present evidence consistent with this point. They show that satisfaction with democracy in Britain increased by over eight percentage points at the time of the Falklands War. This suggests that the momentary salience of the war changed the considerations that informed respondents' judgments. It follows that the extent to which SWD taps support for incumbent authorities may ebb and flow as a function of both normal policy cycles and unexpected political developments.

The final concern is that the constructs tapped by SWD may depend partly on the context of the survey itself. Research on SWB reveals that the observed correlates of general life satisfaction often vary dramatically depending on what items were asked immediately before the general satisfaction item (e.g., Schwarz, Strack, and Mai 1991; Strack, Martin, and Schwarz 1988). As a result, comparisons that draw on data from different instruments are severely compromised. For SWD, the matter of survey context likely is most important for longitudinal rather than cross-sectional inquiries. Cross-sectional surveys, even those such as the Eurobarometer and the Latinbarometer that gather data from multiple nations, use the same question order for each respondent. Thus, if responses to the SWD item vary as a function of the survey context, there is at least some solace in the fact that all respondents are exposed to the same array of questions. Longitudinal research is more problematic. The SWD item has been included quite frequently on the Eurobarometer, for instance, but many questions on any given rendition of the Eurobarometer are unique to that survey's particular theme. This wholesale change in the survey context means that comparison of SWD over time potentially is highly perilous.

We have identified substantial confusion regarding the meaning of SWD, and, if anything, we have added to that confusion by suggesting new possibilities as to what SWD represents. As matters now stand, five options remain viable. The SWD item measures either a single level of support, or it captures attitudes across several levels. If SWD taps only one level of support, that level may be support for incumbent authorities (option 1), support for the political system (option 2), or support for democracy as a general form of government (option 3). Or, if SWD bridges levels, it may function as a broad summary indicator of support (option 4), or it may be that the meaning of SWD varies across individuals, time, or space (option 5). The landscape is in disarray. We hope to bring at least a modicum of clarity to this analytical thicket by conducting a series of empirical tests designed to explore the substantive content of SWD.

## Empirical Tests

The standard approach to testing construct validity is to measure the correlation between the item in question and an alternate indicator of the construct. If a high correlation is observed, the analyst can infer that the item and the alternate indicator represent the same construct. In the current case, SWD may tap one or more of three distinct constructs. Thus, we must examine the correlation between SWD and indicators of support for incumbent authorities, system support, and support for democracy as a form of government. Toward this end, we will report a series of bivariate and multivariate tests. These tests are conducted using three data sources: a survey we administered in Romania in 1999; a large national survey administered in El Salvador in 1999; and the 1997 Latinbarometer, with data from 17 nations.<sup>7</sup>

We have suggested that what SWD measures may vary across individuals, time, or space. Two of these possibilities, variance across individuals and across space, will be tested here. We will conduct two tests to determine whether the substantive content of SWD varies across individuals. First, data from an open-ended item included on the Romania survey are reported to assess what respondents had in mind when answering the SWD question. Second, data from a knowledge battery included on the El Salvador survey are used to determine whether the propensity to view SWD in terms of support for authorities, system support, or general support for democracy varies with political sophistication. We will offer one test of the possibility that what SWD measures varies across space: Latinbarometer data will be used to test whether SWD represents the same level or levels of political support across the data set's 17 nations.

### TEST ONE: ROMANIA

Romanian data are from a survey we conducted in July 1999 in the Transylvanian city of Cluj-Napoca.<sup>8</sup> The SWD item was asked of half of the

7. Ideally, we also would have run tests using data from advanced industrial democracies. Unfortunately, the required data are not available. The SWD item has been asked numerous times on the Eurobarometer, but the Eurobarometer does not include alternate measures of political support. Conversely, the World Values Survey (WVS) includes items that tap system support and support for democracy, but not SWD. One option we attempted was an aggregate-level analysis, by country, using SWD from the Eurobarometer and system support and support for democracy from the WVS. This proved impossible, however, because data could be matched from only five countries. One reader has suggested that since no evidence exists that SWD does not represent a pure measure of system support or any other level of support, in advanced industrial democracies, validity should be assumed. We disagree. First, there is no presumption of validity. It is the responsibility of the researcher to show that the scale is valid, not the responsibility of the critic to show that it is not. Second, the uses to which SWD has been put are logically incompatible. The scale cannot simultaneously function as a pure indicator of two distinct constructs. Third, the results to be reported below are highly similar with Clarke and Kornberg's findings from Canada. The best available evidence from an industrial democracy corroborates our findings from Romania and Latin America.

8. Cluj-Napoca is a large city in central Transylvania. Interviews were conducted in person by

survey's 222 respondents. In examining these data, our first task is to determine whether SWD is correlated with indicators of support for authorities, system support, and general support for democracy. We operationalize support for authorities with data from a series of items that measured confidence in four political leaders: Romania's president, prime minister, president of the chamber of deputies, and minister of justice ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ). We operationalize system support with data that measured confidence in six political institutions: parliament, the armed forces, civil service, police, the judicial system, and the political system in general ( $\alpha = 0.69$ ).<sup>9</sup> Data from four items are used to measure general support for democracy: whether the respondent generally favors the idea of democracy; whether the respondent feels that a democratic system is a better form of government than communism; whether the respondent feels that a democratic system is a better form of government than a military regime; and whether the respondent agrees that democracy is superior to any other form of government ( $\alpha = 0.67$ ). All scales have been recoded so that they range in value from 0 to 1. Factor analysis and correlational tests confirm that the scales tap empirically distinct constructs.<sup>10</sup>

Estimates of the bivariate and multivariate relationships between SWD and the three support scales are reported in table 1.<sup>11</sup> Bivariate correlation coefficients (Kendall's tau-c) are shown in column 1. Each of the coefficients achieves statistical significance, although none is especially large. These results are consistent with those reported previously by Kornberg and Clarke (1994), who found that SWD was positively related to, but not coterminous with, indicators of three levels of political support.

Collinearity among the support scales potentially confounds the bivariate tests. With only modest correlations, it may be the case, for instance, that SWD and abstract support for democracy are correlated only because the latter overlaps both support for authorities and system support. We can account for this possibility through multivariate analysis. Ordered logit coefficients are

five two-person teams of interviewers. Interviews took place July 9–13, 1999. Households were randomly selected for inclusion in the survey, as were persons within selected households. There were 313 households in the original sample. From this, 222 completed interviews were produced (71 percent). The remaining households were evenly split between persons who were not home (48) and individuals who declined to participate in the survey (43). We wish to thank Gabriel Badescu and Emil Boc for their assistance in the design and administration of this survey.

9. All confidence items have four choice options: a great deal of confidence, some, not very much, and none at all.

10. Factor analysis yielded three factors, with all items loading on the expected factors. There were, however, two items that produced mixed results. The item measuring confidence in the prime minister loaded equally highly on the authorities and institutional confidence factors. Likewise, the item measuring confidence in the parliament loaded equally highly on these same two factors. Such "blurring" of images is common in the support literature (e.g., Kornberg and Clarke 1992), and it recurs below with data from El Salvador. Support for authorities and system support are moderately correlated (Kendall's tau-c = 0.37), whereas general support for democracy is weakly correlated with both support for authorities (0.13) and system support (0.09).

11. In an effort to avoid priming respondents to answer the SWD item in terms of a particular level of support, SWD was separated from all other support indicators by six demographic items (sex, ethnicity, education, etc.).

**Table 1.** Correlates of Satisfaction with Democracy in Romania

	Bivariate Estimates <sup>a</sup>	Multivariate Estimates <sup>b</sup>
Support for authorities	.29***	2.25*
System support	.22**	1.49
Support for democracy	.16*	3.20**

SOURCE.—1999 Cluj-Napoca survey.

NOTE.—Significance levels are calculated using one-tailed tests.

<sup>a</sup> Kendall's tau-c.

<sup>b</sup> Ordered logistic regression coefficients.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

reported in the second column of table 1. The correlation between SWD and support for democracy again attains statistical significance, as does the coefficient for support for authorities; the coefficient for system support is insignificant.

Together, the bivariate and multivariate results suggest that, in Romania, SWD tapped at least two levels of support: support for incumbent authorities and general support for democracy.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, SWD was not found to be highly correlated with any level of support. This means that of the five options outlined above, only two appear viable: SWD apparently either functions as a summary indicator that bridges several levels of support, or SWD measures different things for different people.

One means to explore what respondents have in mind when they answer a survey question is to ask them directly, using an open-ended follow-up item. In Romania, the item following SWD asked respondents to name the one thing with which they were most satisfied or dissatisfied. We coded the 108 responses into 22 initial categories and then reduced these to the four broad clusters (listed below with examples):<sup>13</sup>

1. Economic issues ( $N = 46$ )
  - Low wages
  - Unemployment
2. Political institutional issues ( $N = 40$ )

12. With respect to system support, we view the results as a draw. The bivariate effect is statistically significant, but the multivariate effect is not. However, the logit model produced a positive coefficient of moderate size, which suggests that a statistically significant effect might be detected in a test conducted with a larger sample. In short, the evidence is not clear that system support is related to SWD in Romania, but the evidence also is too mixed for us to assert conclusively that system support and SWD are not related.

13. Source: 1999 Cluj-Napoca survey. Data are from an open-ended follow-up question to satisfaction with democracy in which respondents were asked to name the one thing with which they were most satisfied or dissatisfied. The examples are translated directly from interviewers' records of respondents' answers.

- The judicial system is inefficient
- How the minister of justice is doing his job
- 3. Democratic freedoms ( $N = 11$ )
  - Freedom of speech
  - The right to go on trips outside Romania
- 4. Social issues ( $N = 11$ )
  - Protections of social welfare do not exist
  - The system of medical insurance

A plurality of respondents (46) expressed satisfaction or (more commonly) dissatisfaction with the state of Romania's economy. Nearly as many respondents (40) commented on the performance of Romania's political leaders and institutions. Eleven respondents made reference to democratic freedoms, and an equal number mentioned specific aspects of social policy.

We view data from the open-ended item as being consistent with the proposition that SWD means different things to different people. When asked about "satisfaction with the way democracy works in Romania," respondents based their answers on a broad range of considerations, including general features of democracy (e.g., freedom of speech), aspects of Romania's political structure (e.g., inefficiency in the judicial system), the performance of specific political leaders, and an array of issue-based concerns. The SWD item leaves it to respondents to determine what criteria should be used in assessing democracy. Data from the Romanian survey suggest that the criteria respondents think to use vary widely.

One might view results to this point with skepticism in that we have analyzed data from only one small survey conducted in a single metropolitan area. Viewed analytically, we feel that such skepticism is unwarranted. Assume for a moment the worst case, which is that Romania somehow is atypical, meaning that the pattern of results identified there should not be expected to be replicated elsewhere. To accept this argument, one would also have to accept that the substantive content represented by SWD is not constant; that is, the item measures something different in Romania from what it measures in other nations. In short, SWD means different things to different people! But this is an unnecessary exercise in logic. First, our results provide general corroboration of Kornberg and Clarke's findings from Canada. Surely it would be quite a stretch to assume that Canada and Romania—nations impossible to mistake for one another—are the only two countries in which SWD simultaneously taps multiple levels of political support. Second, additional corroboration is reported below, beginning with data from El Salvador.

#### TEST TWO: EL SALVADOR

Data from El Salvador are from a large national survey conducted in October 1999, under the supervision of the third author (see Seligson, Cruz, and

**Table 2.** Correlates of Satisfaction with Democracy in El Salvador

	Bivariate Estimates <sup>a</sup>	Multivariate Estimates <sup>b</sup>
Support for authorities	.20***	1.35***
System support	.26**	2.21***
Support for democracy	.05**	.39**

SOURCE.—1999 El Salvador survey.

NOTE.—Significance levels are calculated using one-tailed tests.

<sup>a</sup> Kendall's tau-c.

<sup>b</sup> Ordered logistic regression coefficients.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Cordova Macias 2000).<sup>14</sup> Support for authorities is operationalized using data from a five-category measure of presidential approval. System support is operationalized using data regarding confidence in five political institutions: the armed forces, the legislative assembly, the central government, the police, and the Supreme Court ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ). Each confidence item has seven choice options. Support for democracy as a form of government is operationalized using data from a three-category item regarding whether democracy is preferable to any other form of government. As in Romania, we have recoded all support indicators so that they range in value from 0 to 1. Diagnostic tests confirm that the support measures tap empirically distinct constructs.<sup>15</sup>

As in Romania, we begin analysis in El Salvador by assessing the bivariate and multivariate relationships between SWD and the alternate indicators of support. These results are reported in table 2. Looking initially at the bivariate correlations, we see that results from El Salvador are highly similar to those from Romania. As in Romania, all three correlations achieve statistical significance, none is particularly high, and the correlation with support for de-

14. The El Salvador survey includes 2,914 respondents, with all interviews conducted in person. Respondents were drawn from 308 primary sampling units in 69 of the nation's 262 municipalities. Each primary sampling unit contained approximately three hundred households, and the sample included 10 individuals per sampling unit, for a total of 3,080. With 2,914 completed interviews, the survey's response rate is over 94 percent.

15. Only two factors emerged from a factor analysis because presidential approval loaded weakly on the system support factor; support for democracy as a form of government was the sole variable to load on the second factor. As in Romania, system support and support for authorities are moderately correlated in El Salvador (Kendall's tau-c = 0.33); support for democracy as a form of government is weakly and negatively correlated with both support for authorities (-0.04) and system support (-0.05). Items used to measure support for incumbent authorities and support for the political system were asked early on the El Salvador survey, well before SWD. Items concerning tolerance and political participation separated SWD from these support indicators. The item used to measure general support for democracy was asked immediately before SWD. This placement, which is consistent with the 1997 Latinbarometer (see below), potentially primed respondents to answer SWD partly in terms of their general attitudes regarding democracy.

mocracy as a form of government is the weakest of the three (this correlation is especially weak in El Salvador).

The multivariate estimates provide further evidence that SWD tapped multiple levels of political support in El Salvador. Unlike in Romania, where the multivariate effect for system support was insignificant, each of the three support coefficients achieves a high level of statistical significance in El Salvador. Including Kornberg and Clarke's findings from Canada, data from three rather varied nations point to a common conclusion: SWD is not a valid indicator of any single level of political support.

In Romania, data from an open-ended item suggested that respondents drew on different considerations when answering SWD. No such data are available in El Salvador, but the existence of a political knowledge battery permits an alternate test of the hypothesis that what SWD measures varies across respondents. Factual measures of political knowledge have gained wide use as indicators of political sophistication (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Mondak 2001; Zaller 1992). Numerous studies have shown that political decision making varies as a function of political knowledge (e.g., Althaus 1998; Bartels 1996). We pursue a similar question in El Salvador. At issue is whether respondents with high levels of political knowledge view the substantive content of SWD differently than do their less-informed counterparts. Our expectation is that respondents with high knowledge levels will have a relatively broad, long-term perspective, whereas respondents with low knowledge levels will view politics in a more narrow, short-term manner. Put more tangibly, we expect that respondents with high knowledge levels will answer SWD in terms of support for democracy as a form of government and that respondents with low knowledge levels will answer SWD in terms of support for incumbent authorities.

Political knowledge is measured with five factual questions about politics. The items asked about the identity of the U.S. president, the president of El Salvador's legislative assembly, the party currently in power, the term of office for El Salvador's president, and the year El Salvador's constitution was implemented ( $\alpha = 0.58$ ). We split the El Salvador sample into two groups based on their knowledge scores. The low knowledge group includes the 42 percent of respondents who answered zero, one, or two of the knowledge questions correctly, and the high knowledge group includes the 58 percent of respondents who correctly answered three or more of the knowledge items.<sup>16</sup> Using these knowledge indicators, we obtain new estimates of the bivariate and multivariate correlates of SWD, with separate estimates calculated for the high and low knowledge groups. These results are reported in table 3.

16. As is often the case with knowledge scales, the alpha level for our knowledge scale is low. Two points warrant mention. First, it is important to keep in mind that coefficient alpha marks only the lower bound of reliability. Second, good knowledge scales include a mix of easy and difficult items, but use of such a mix inherently attenuates interitem correlations. In the current case, the items varied widely in difficulty.

**Table 3.** Individual-Level Differences in the Correlates of Satisfaction with Democracy: The Impact of Political Knowledge

	Bivariate Estimates <sup>a</sup>		Multivariate Estimates <sup>b</sup>	
	Low Knowledge	High Knowledge	Low Knowledge	High Knowledge
Support for authorities	.20***	.20***	2.01***	1.15***
System support	.28***	.26***	2.37***	2.20***
Support for democracy	.00	.07***	.04	.55***

SOURCE.—1999 El Salvador survey.

NOTE.—Significance levels are calculated using one-tailed tests.

<sup>a</sup> Kendall's tau-c.

<sup>b</sup> Ordered logistic regression coefficients.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

The results indicate that the perceived meaning of SWD is not constant across levels of political knowledge. Bivariate results reveal that abstract support for democracy is correlated with SWD only among those respondents with high knowledge levels. Likewise, multivariate results for the low knowledge group reveal significant correlations between SWD and both support for authorities and system support, but no effect for support for democracy as a form of government. In contrast, SWD and general support for democracy are correlated for respondents with high levels of political knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

Although data from Romania suggest that respondents vary in the considerations they bring to bear when answering the SWD item, we have no way to determine whether this variance is systematic or idiosyncratic. In El Salvador, in contrast, a systematic source of variance has been identified. Respondents with high levels of political knowledge answer SWD partly by contemplating the merits of democracy as a form of government, but respondents with low levels of political knowledge do not. The SWD item means different things to different people, and at least one source of this variance is systematic.

#### TEST THREE: THE 1997 LATINBAROMETER

Latinbarometer data are available from 17 nations. Unfortunately, the Latinbarometer does not include questions that tap support for incumbent author-

17. In the multivariate tests, the differences between the two knowledge groups are statistically significant for both specific support ( $p < .05$ ) and support for democracy as a form of government ( $p < .05$ ).



ities.<sup>18</sup> This is only a minor limitation. Our tests in Romania and El Salvador and Kornberg and Clarke's Canadian results all have identified significant relationships between SWD and support for authorities. Hence, no doubt remains regarding whether SWD taps this level of support in at least some cases. What we cannot ascertain is whether the extent to which SWD reflects support for authorities varies across nations. However, such tests can be run with this 17-nation data set with a focus on system support and support for democracy as a form of government.

System support is operationalized using data on confidence in five political institutions: the armed forces, the judiciary, the president, congress, and police ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ).<sup>19</sup> Support for democracy as a form of government is operationalized using data on whether respondents view democratic government as superior to authoritarian government. As in our previous tests, diagnostic evidence confirms that the support indicators represent empirically distinct constructs.<sup>20</sup>

At question is whether the extent to which SWD taps system support and support for democracy varies across nations. Because it is unreasonable to expect that the relationships will be of precisely the same magnitude in each country, evaluative criteria must be devised so that we can judge how different effects must be across nations for them to be taken as too different. We propose two criteria. The first red flag would be if SWD is significantly correlated with one or both support measures in some nations and not in others. For instance, if SWD and system support are correlated in only 10 of the 17 Latinbarometer nations, this would be clear evidence that SWD represents different things in different places. The second red flag would be if the magnitude of correlations varies widely across nations. Here we are in more subjective territory, but we see it as reasonable that the correlations vary by less than 100 percent from one nation to another. In other words, we would see cause for concern in results indicating that the relationship between system support and SWD is twice as strong in one nation as in another.

Red flags abound in table 4. Nations are listed in descending order of the correlation between SWD and system support. The one bit of constancy is that system support is significantly related to SWD in all nations. However, the magnitude of the relationships varies considerably, with bivariate corre-

18. The Latinbarometer Corporation in Santiago, Chile, samples largely urban populations in mainland Latin America. In each country approximately one thousand interviews were conducted, with the exception of Bolivia and Paraguay where the samples were somewhat smaller. The data were made available courtesy of the Inter-American Development Bank.

19. Costa Rica and Panama do not have armies. Therefore, system support is operationalized in these nations using data only on the other four institutions.

20. Factor analysis produced two factors, with the five system support items loading on the first factor and support for democracy loading on the second factor. Additionally, the correlation between the two levels of support is negligible and negative ( $-0.02$ ). System support items were asked late in the Latinbarometer, after SWD. General support for democracy was asked immediately before SWD (see n. 15 above).

**Table 4.** Correlates of Satisfaction with Democracy in Latin America

	Bivariate Estimates <sup>a</sup>		Multivariate Estimates <sup>b</sup>	
	System Support	Support for Democracy	System Support	Support for Democracy
Uruguay	.29***	.06***	2.89***	1.16***
El Salvador	.26***	.01	2.36***	.26 <sup>+</sup>
Guatemala	.26***	.26***	2.06***	1.88***
Panama	.25***	.03 <sup>+</sup>	2.23***	.31*
Peru	.23***	-.03	2.21***	-.08
Bolivia	.20***	.07*	2.31***	.26 <sup>+</sup>
Chile	.20***	.24***	2.10***	1.33***
Honduras	.20***	.20***	1.70***	1.16***
Brazil	.19***	.14***	1.70***	.69***
Colombia	.17***	.15***	1.36***	1.05***
Nicaragua	.17***	.18***	1.34***	1.34***
Paraguay	.16***	.23***	1.61***	1.29***
Argentina	.15***	.22***	1.85***	2.06***
Ecuador	.15***	.04 <sup>+</sup>	1.36***	1.05***
Venezuela	.13***	.19***	.99***	1.11***
Mexico	.10***	.01	1.03***	.11
Costa Rica	.05*	.05**	.48*	.69**

SOURCE.—1997 Latinbarometer.

NOTE.—Significance levels are calculated using one-tailed tests.

<sup>a</sup> Kendall's tau-c.<sup>b</sup> Ordered logistic regression coefficients.<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ .\*  $p < .05$ .\*\*  $p < .01$ .\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

lations ranging from 0.29 in Uruguay to 0.05 in Costa Rica. Multivariate estimates vary similarly. Results for support for democracy are even more mixed. The relationship with SWD is weak or nonexistent in several nations, whereas it is relatively strong elsewhere. Functionally, the bivariate correlations range from 0 (El Salvador, Mexico, and Peru) to 0.26 (Guatemala). Four distinct patterns can be seen in table 4: (1) SWD is related to system support, but is not clearly related to support for democracy (El Salvador, Mexico, and Peru); (2) SWD is related to both system support and support for democracy, and the former effect is the stronger (Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Panama, and Uruguay); (3) SWD is related to both system support and support for democracy, but neither factor is clearly stronger than the other (Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Paraguay); and (4) SWD

is related to both system support and support for democracy, and the latter effect is the stronger (Argentina and Venezuela).<sup>21</sup>

Cross-national comparison risks producing misleading results when analysis focuses on data that represent different things in different places. By this standard, investigations using SWD are rife with ambiguity. Three data sets have been examined. Results demonstrate that SWD represents multiple levels of political support and that the substantive content of SWD varies across both individuals and nations.

## Implications

This article has examined the properties of a survey item that measures satisfaction with the way democracy works in one's country. This item has been asked on the Eurobarometer, the Latinbarometer, and elsewhere. Numerous scholars have analyzed data from this question, and many of these works are among the most prominent studies on political support. Curiously, however, this past research has generated no consensus regarding what it is that "satisfaction with democracy" measures. To the contrary, the literature is characterized by contradiction. Some authors have claimed that SWD measures support for incumbent authorities, others counter that it measures system support, a third school suggests that SWD bridges multiple levels of support, and still others argue that it is irrelevant what dimension or dimensions of support the item represents. We have viewed this morass with deep concern because scholarly progress inevitably will be slowed, or even stalled, if researchers are unable to settle fundamental questions of measurement. Thus, our objective in this article has been to provide a straightforward assessment of SWD in an effort to resolve just what it is that this item measures. We have approached this task through a review of past research, through an analytical assessment of SWD, and through a series of empirical tests drawing on three data sets gathered in 18 nations.

The news is not good. Although we would prefer to end on an optimistic note, nothing in the preceding pages provides grounds for optimism. The

21. It should be noted that the Latinbarometer results also provide further evidence that SWD does not constitute a valid indicator of any single level of support. None of the correlations reported in table 4 is high, and SWD is correlated with indicators of two levels of political support in most nations. One might view the variance reported in table 4 as evidence of unsystematic fluctuations rather than true differences across nations in what SWD represents. As a counter to this perspective, it is instructive to compare results for El Salvador in table 4 with those in table 2. All effects—system support and support for democracy in both bivariate and multivariate tests—are nearly identical. We would not expect such striking similarity to occur by chance, particularly given that El Salvador produced outliers for both system support (a relatively high correlation) and support for democracy (a relatively low correlation) on the Latinbarometer. In the aggregate, SWD meant the same thing to the people of El Salvador in 1999 as it did in 1997 even though the surveys were conducted with different sample designs, and by different survey organizations. This stability suggests that the variance across nations shown in table 4 reflects true differences, not unsystematic fluctuation.

SWD item suffers from severe flaws—indeed, fatal flaws in our judgment. Our review of past research has revealed a striking lack of agreement as to what SWD measures. Analytical assessment has demonstrated that the meaning of the item is inherently ambiguous because multiple interpretations are possible regarding what standard the respondent is to use when gauging “satisfaction with democracy.” Empirical tests have shown that these potential flaws have produced tangible consequences: SWD taps multiple dimensions of political support, and the mix of those dimensions varies across both individuals and nations.

The deficiencies identified here produce two daunting problems for researchers who seek to analyze data using the SWD item. First, for any given observation—be it individual-level or aggregate-level—we simply do not know what SWD measures. The essence of validity is lost. In the best-case scenario, SWD captures one of seven different things: support for authorities, system support, support for democracy as a form of government, any two of these three dimensions of support, or all three. Because SWD can tap multiple constructs, and because we do not know which construct or constructs the item represents for any given observation, it follows that we have no way to ensure that the substantive content of SWD is constant across observations. That is, SWD can mean different things to different people. And it does. At the individual level, SWD means something different to respondents with high and low levels of knowledge about politics. At the aggregate level, the mix of considerations represented by SWD varies from one nation to the next. We have seen, for example, that SWD has one meaning in Panama, another meaning in Paraguay, and yet another meaning in Peru.

Because the substantive content of SWD is both uncertain and varied, meaningful comparison is impossible. For instance, if two survey respondents differ in their expressed levels of satisfaction with democracy, it may be that their perceptions of their nation’s political system truly differ, but it also may be that these respondents simply disagreed regarding what it was that they were being asked. When a survey question measures system support for one respondent and support for authorities for another, those data defy comparison. The same issue recurs when we move from individuals to aggregates. It makes as much sense to compare satisfaction with democracy in Panama, Paraguay, and Peru as it does to compare the weather in France with the cost of living in Austria and with employment opportunities in Belgium.

The second problem in analysis of SWD is that exploration of the antecedents of such ambiguous data can be of little or no theoretical utility. Our task as researchers is to identify relationships among theoretical constructs, not to identify relationships among variables. Suppose, for instance, that we are able to construct an excellent multivariate model for a dependent variable whose label and identity have been irretrievably lost. It would be absurd to report such a model. We are in nearly this circumstance with SWD. When predictors of SWD are identified, we have no means to ascertain which di-

mension or dimensions of support these predictors have influenced. Past research has found, for instance, that satisfaction with democracy is greatest among people who voted for the incumbent government, and among people who believe that the national economy has improved. Because of the ambiguities we have identified, the inferences that can be derived from these findings are very limited. The variables are related to one another, but we do not know why this is so. Consequently, we can speak only about the antecedents of the survey response, not about the antecedents of the theoretical construct.

In the past, many researchers have been too cavalier regarding the issue of validity as it pertains to SWD. The result has been the accumulation of a body of research that is of highly uncertain meaning. Satisfaction with democracy suffers from profound, fundamental flaws as an empirical measure. These deficiencies are of such magnitude that analysis of SWD should be avoided, and the item itself should not be included on future surveys. At an absolute minimum, future analyses that make use of SWD must exercise extreme caution. Our understanding of the nature of political support will not grow if empirical research remains heavily reliant on data that stubbornly resist meaningful interpretation.

Movement away from analysis of SWD should not be viewed as a setback for students of political support. Research on political support flourished before the emergence of SWD as a favorite empirical indicator, and such research can continue to flourish even if SWD is discarded. We concur with Norris (1999b), who argues that the most prudent course is for researchers to rely on those scales that constitute pure measures of particular dimensions of political support. Institutional confidence, the scale used by Norris, provides one ready example, and the political support-alienation index used by Muller and Seligson is another (e.g., Muller, Jukam, and Seligson 1982; Seligson 1983). It should be self-evident that improved understanding of political support requires that we know what it is that our dependent variable measures. The bottom line is that SWD fails this fundamental test.

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