

NORRIS, Pippa. *Democratic Deficit: critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 334 p.

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A brief look on the recent scientific production of political sciences is enough to conclude that democracy is one of its most studied objects. As an important researcher on the theme, Pippa Norris seems to have well defined what is of interest to her in this area: the relationship between citizen and democracy.

### **Comparison between her two major works**

Norris' intellectual production on the theme had been of interest in the academia in 1999, publishing year of the book *Critical Citizens*, from which she is the organizer and author of some chapters. From among the several contributions of this work, two can be regarded as the most important: (1) the diagnosis that the individual confidence levels in representative institutions and actors are frankly declining worldwide and (2) the identification of a type called "critical citizen", who is chiefly characterized as having a low affection for traditional political office-holders, while showing a strong affection for democratic ideals.

Comparing that work to her more recent book, *Democratic Deficit*, it can be observed that the author deals with the same research problem – the determinants of the individual support to democracy –, but some differences may be pointed out. In addition to the fact that the latter is an authorial book, with no contributions from other researchers, two new targets are present: the search for evidences based on a larger quantity of explanatory factors and a distinct interpretation from the usual on the tendencies of confidence in representative political institutions.

As regards the first issue, the author gathers and discusses diverse arguments that deal with the determinants of individual political

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orientations and, thence, selects variables indicating socioeconomic characteristics, economic performance, public policies evaluations, institutional configurations, values, knowledge about democracy and access to the media contents to test their effects upon the support to democracy. In this manner, Norris manifests the lack of compromise with a specific theoretical current, by taking account of the major contributions of the field, aiming at responding to the problem dealt with.

As for the second issue, Norris criticizes those who consider that there is a current uniform trend of decline in individual confidence levels in representative institutions and actors, worldwide. According to her, this sort of interpretation is dominant in the recent academic production – also present in some chapters of the book *Critical Citizens* – and, for that, the efforts of researchers have been rather than diagnosing the problem, they have analyzed its possible consequences. In possession of data of opinion polls, the author carries out longitudinal studies, which range from the 1970s to the recent times, for the case of the U.S.<sup>1</sup>, and from the late 1990s until recently, for seventeen European countries<sup>2</sup>. The conclusion she reached is that the confidence rates go through a number of fluctuations, in the periods analyzed, for the set of countries, and its uniform decrease is not perceptible. Norris, however, identifies some exceptions, such as the cases of Portugal and England, which show a decline trend of around 20% of the confidence rate, and Belgium, Finland and Denmark, which go to an opposite direction, but with the addition of the rate on a similar level.

## Democratic deficit

The book *Democratic Deficit* is made up of twelve chapters. The first of them is intended to present the contents of the book and identify the major theories on democratic support. Therein, the author also explains the meaning of this expression.

The second chapter has a predominantly theoretical characteristic, as the nature of the individual support the democratic

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<sup>1</sup> Figures 4.1 to 4.4, shown from pages 14 to 17 of Chapter 4 (Norris, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Figures 4.5 to 4.7 shown from pages 18 to 20 and tables 4.1 to 4.3, shown from pages 23 to 25 of Chapter 4 (Norris, 2012).

political regime is discussed, with a special attention to the contributions of Easton (1965). This is dispensable for those who have read the introduction to *Critical Citizens*, once the author resumes the same discussion basically using the same arguments.

In the third chapter, the information on the data used in the book is provided. An empirical test is also applied, which evidences the multidimensional political support, corroborating with Easton's thesis. The political support, according to Norris, is constituted of five elements: confidence in institutions, evaluations of the democratic performance, endorsement of this regime's principles, support for democratic values and national pride.

This same issue is resumed in a compared manner in chapter five. The major findings are (1) the citizens from countries with a larger democratic tradition show deep-seated roots as regards democratic values; (2) the autocratic countries have the largest institutional and nationalism confidence levels; and (3) the variances in the support rates for the democratic regime are larger within a group of exclusive-democratic countries than in a group of democratic and non-democratic countries. All this shows, Norris points out, that the affection for democratic values is large even among citizens from non-democratic countries and attests that the democratization process is only one of the dimensions necessary to understand the contemporary patterns of popular support for democracy worldwide.

The discussion in chapter four is on trust. After a wide theoretical approach on the theme, Norris compares the data in a cross-national manner (among countries) and longitudinally (over the years). The results show the fragility of the argument that establishes the decline trend of trust rates worldwide, indicating a diagnosis in which the characteristic is the fluctuation of these rates, with the exceptions mentioned above.

In chapter six, the inquiry's focus is on the democratic deficit, defined as the disparity between the level of democratic aspirations and the satisfaction with how democracy works, and measured individually. The most substantive finding is in Table 6.2, which shows the different rates of democratic deficit by world region. The Scandinavian region shows the highest rate of democratic aspiration (9.19 out of 10) and the lowest democratic deficit (-1.53, within the interval from -10 to 10). The lowest aspiration (7.99) and satisfaction

(5.06) rates were observed in Central & Eastern Europe, which, consequently, has also the highest democratic deficit (-2.96).

From chapter seven to ten, Norris performs inferential statistical tests aiming at identifying linkages among, on one hand, values, political knowledge, access to media contents and assessment of regimes performance and, on the other hand, governments with political orientation that express satisfaction and affection towards democracy. Contrary to chapters four and five, in these, the data comparison is carried out in a cross-national manner only, as the data used are those of the fifth wave of the *World Values Survey* (WVS).

The theories on political culture are approached in chapter seven and the analysis begins with the contributions of classical authors, e.g. Stuart Mill (1983) and Tocqueville (2010), going through the Almond and Verba's famous study (*The Civic Culture*) and concludes with the recent works of Putnam (2000) and Inglehart & Welzel (2009). The author also studies texts relative to the modernization theory. The major results that she reached evidence that self-expression and post-materialism values are positively linked with democratic aspirations and satisfaction with democracy, and higher educational levels have a positive link with democratic aspirations and a negative with democratic satisfaction. Furthermore, the absence of statistically significant linkages between Human Development Index (HDI) and older cohorts put under suspicion the arguments of the modernization theory:

Modernization theories are most powerful when seeking to account for the longterm evolution of cultural attitudes, such as the persistent erosion of religiosity in affluent nations, or the growth of more egalitarian attitudes towards sex roles in the home, family and workplace. But these theories are not well designed to account for the dynamic ebb and flow of attitudes towards political regimes (Norris, 2011, p. 10)<sup>3</sup>.

The discussion that the author carries out in chapter eight is on democratic knowledge. Firstly, she describes the three major theories that approach the issue. In the socialization theory, the recurring argument is that the political knowledge is, in a good part, acquired in the formative years of life, that is, during childhood through adolescence

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<sup>3</sup> Excerpt from Chapter 7.

and beyond (Sears, 1975). The sources of learning include the family, school, local community, mass media, civic institutions and other agencies of cultural transmission. Whereas the scientists of the current that Norris calls “skeptical theory” of political knowledge emphasize the limits of citizen’s cognitive awareness, even in rich countries and long-standing democratic states. She states that the reference work on this issue is Converse’s (1964), in which he demonstrates that most of the U.S. voters have no deeply-held convictions or notions of the political debate, and this characteristic is satisfied only by the well-educated. The author also brings into debate the contributions of the relativistic view, which emphasizes the difference of the meaning of democracy in diverse contexts. According to relativists, the language, institutions and meaning of democracy are remade and evolve within each society, so that classical liberal notions are not fixed in stone when transported to other cultures (Schaffer, 1998).

In this chapter, Norris also distinguishes three types of possible understandings of democracy: the procedural, which links the existence of representative political institutions and the defense of civil liberties with the notion of democracy; the instrumental, which links democracy with a welfare state; and the authoritarian, in which authoritarian features of government are understood as democracy. The empirical evidences suggest that the procedural understanding of democracy prevails in all continents, and it is relatively more common in Scandinavia and less in Asia and Africa. Another important observation comes from the results of inferential tests: they point out that macro-variables – e.g. experience of democracy, economic development, cosmopolitan communications and political development – prove stronger predictors of democratic knowledge than variables such as instruction levels and family income.

The divergent conceptions about the possible effects of news media on the citizens’ political orientations is the issue of chapter nine. The researchers studying this theme may be divided, according to Norris, into two groups: the proponents of the so-called *video-malaise*, with the conviction that the news media consumption is related to political cynicism (Robinson, 1976, Patterson, 1993, Putnam, 1995) and those claiming that the access to news media is not linked with detachment from politics, pointing out, also, a correlation between the access to

news media and a greater political interest and participation (Newton, 1997, Norris, 2000).

Norris deals with, within this chapter, comparing these two theoretical accounts to explain the democratic deficit. The data analysis results suggest that higher frequencies of news media exposure are related to higher rates of democratic aspirations. They also demonstrate a positive relation of exposure to radio and television news and satisfaction with democracy, whereas this relation is reversed as regards internet use and democratic satisfaction. Furthermore, the access to all media is related to lower levels of democratic deficit, i.e., to smaller differences between democratic aspirations and satisfaction with democracy. For Norris, the data show that the *video-malaise* thesis is not supported.

In chapter ten, Norris addresses the contributions of the rational choice theory for studies on political behavior. She also seeks empirical evidences to test the assumptions that deal with the centrality of governments' performance in explaining the individuals' political orientation.

The major results show that there is a relationship among most of the macro-level government performance indices – such as the ones built by *Freedom House*, *Polity IV*, World Bank, Transparency International – and satisfaction with how democracy works; the exception being the Cingarelli-Richards (CIRI) Database, which measures the range of respect to human rights. At the micro level, the variables that measure subjective well-being are shown as statistically significant predictors in all tests performed by the author, being positively linked with democratic satisfaction. The third perspective explored by the author is that in which the power-sharing systems have effects on the democratic satisfaction. Influenced by the studies of Anderson (1995) and Anderson & Guillory (1997), she analyzes whether there is any difference in democratic satisfaction between “winners” (who supported the governing party) and “losers” (who supported the opposition). She identifies a positive relationship between “winners” and democratic satisfaction and an opposite situation in the case of “losers”.

In chapter eleven, the author studies the relationship between democratic aspirations and civic engagement. She observes the positive links between aspiration rates and civic engagement, e.g. voluntary

compliance of the law, interest in politics and participation in protest politics. Finally, in the last chapter, the author makes a general synthesis of the major results of her analysis.

### **Major contributions and limits of the study**

In a general manner, the book is regarded as a product of a meticulous work. The author shows to be zealous both in the theoretical discussion and the statistical tests.

All the indices used in the empirical part are punctually simplified by her, which shows how they were built, either through brief pieces of information all over the text or through detailed descriptions in Appendices A and C. Besides, she does not avoid showing the limits and possibilities of use of every index. As examples, the following reflections stand out, namely, (1) the deficiencies of indices measuring the perception of governance quality – e.g. those of Freedom House, Polity I and Transparency International – and (2) the high correlation in data contained in *Polity IV* and *Freedom House* indices<sup>4</sup>.

Additionally on the methodological dimension, it is worth pointing out the accurate choice in carrying out multilevel or hierarchical tests when the set of explanatory factors include, simultaneously, individual and macro variables. Norris (2011, p. 1) chooses to use for this case the *Hierarchical Linear Models* test (HLM), disregarding the *Ordinary Least Squares* (OLS), and justifies attesting that:

the danger of using this method [OLS] is that the standard errors of the regression coefficients can be inaccurate for contextual variables, by overestimating the degrees of freedom (number of cases), and therefore tests of significance can prove misleading<sup>5</sup>.

In developing the theoretical part of the book, Norris brings into discussion the contributions of the theory of political culture, the rational choice, the neoinstitutionalism and the theories of political communication. A number of works are analyzed by the author. On

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<sup>4</sup> These reflections are in chapter ten, in the item *Process Performance indicators*.

<sup>5</sup> This except is on page 1 of Appendix C. In the book, more specific explanations regarding this are found in the last two paragraphs of chapter 3 and in Appendix C.

the other hand, there is no statistical test that is not preceded by a theoretical discussion justifying the introduction of the variables considered. Thus, one cannot label her “merely quantitative”.

An analytical choice of hers, however, could be criticized. All over her work, Norris uses the variable that measures satisfaction as the functioning of democracy<sup>6</sup> as an indicator of political orientation supporting the democratic political regime. At first sight, using that variable as a proxy of the individual support to democracy seems obvious. Nevertheless, some studies, e.g. Rose’s (2002), show that this path is inadequate, at least when used in recent-established democracies. In these contexts, the memory of the authoritarian regime is still lived and, thereby, the most valid manner to measure the democracy preference would be comparing desirability for this regime as regards the latter. This variable is called by Rose “Churchill’s hypothesis”<sup>7</sup>.

Despite the limits of the study, it can be observed that, in a general way, Norris’ work brings several contributions to political science and promises, again, to introduce in the politologists’ jargon another concept: democratic deficit. Besides, the research design followed, the productive theoretical discussion promoted and the results attained will serve, undoubtedly, as guidelines for future studies that aim to explain the individual political orientations as regards the democratic regime, its major institutions and actors.

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<sup>6</sup> The writing of the author’s variable is, “And how democratically is this country being governed today? Again using a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means that it is ‘not at all democratic’ and 10 means that it is ‘completely democratic’, what position would you choose?” (Norris, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> The name of the variable is inspired by a sentence said by Churchill at the House of Commons, England, in 1947: “Democracy is the worst form of government, except from all those other forms that have been tried from time to time” (Wikiquote, 2012).



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