VERA MESSING, BENCE SÁGVÁRI AND DÁVID SIMON *

Methodological Challenges in Cross-comparative Surveys: The Case of Understanding Attitudes towards Democracy in Hungary

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* [vera.messing@tk.mta.hu] (Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest); [sagvari.bence@tk.mta.hu] (Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest); [simon.david@tatk.elte.hu] (Eötvös Loránd University)

Abstract

Our paper examines the validity of the rotating questionnaire block about perceptions about and attitudes towards democracy included in the sixth round of the European Social Survey (ESS). The preliminary assumptions that inspired our analysis were that respondents' understanding of the questions formulated in such an internationally comparative survey may be challenged due to diverging theoretical constructions and narratives that feed historically developed notions of 'democracy.' Moreover, even within the same country people with a different socioeconomic, ethnic, and educational background may have different perceptions about the same questionnaire 'items.' We applied a multi-method approach to analyze the above methodological puzzle: a complex statistical analysis of the Hungarian ESS data served to help examine the consistency of answers to individual items and the entirety of the questionnaire block, while supplementary focus group research helped us apprehend the variety of interpretations of and perceptions about the individual items, as well as problems with understanding various terms included in the questions that assessed attitudes towards democracy. Our findings support the initial hypothesis: respondents had obvious difficulties understanding some of the items designed to assess attitudes towards democracy, while many others had differing interpretations. We conclude that even though the ESS is one of the most refined, well-prepared and validated comparative surveys in Europe, the related data cannot be analyzed without careful consideration of what the individual questions might mean in different contexts.

Keywords: European Social Survey (ESS), Hungary, cross-national survey, validity, reliability, attitudes, democracy.

1. Introduction

One of the most exciting projects in the field of social sciences is the application of international comparative surveys that apply the same methodology across a number of countries characterized by diverging societies, languages, historically developed cultures and norms. However, this process involves numerous risks, especially when examining perceptions and attitudes that are deeply rooted in the cultural and social characteristics of the given communities. The linguistic and cognitive differences in the connotations of various terms can pose further interpretational difficulties, especially if such historically and culturally rooted abstract concepts such as *democracy*, *migration*, *welfare state*, *institutional trust*, etc. are the focus.

With most international surveys, the compilation of questionnaires involves the joint effort of researchers from different countries. However, this does not mean that the questions, or the theoretical constructions behind some of the questions, are completely free from the country-specific worldviews of researchers, dominant narratives, or national circumlocutory characteristics. Thus, despite thorough preparation and precise methodology, it can be difficult to compare results from various countries since the questions do not apply to the same theoretical and cognitive structures.

Researching attitudes towards a complex concept is difficult enough without the international comparative dimension and opens the door to various types of tricky situations. It is hard to measure how seriously respondents take their answers, whether they have definite opinions about the given topics, if they are honest at all, and what degree of social conformity exists, either conscious or unconscious.

We have based our study on the findings of a single survey to examine certain elements of this problem. We used *European Social Survey* (ESS) data for Hungary and also undertook focus group research to reveal the interpretational problems the respondents might have had when answering questions about certain details pertaining to democracy. Our paper was inspired by our experience as the Hungarian coordinators of ESS. We have personally faced the difficulties and interpretational limits of this large-scale European project and are aware of the immense work involved in collecting, analyzing and interpreting the data. We find it important to analyze and address these methodological challenges, even though we believe that ESS provides the best possible quality of comparative data about the attitudes of European populations and we are aware of the immense intellectual input and preparation that the development of questionnaire items demand. No better cross-comparative survey data is being produced with contemporary survey research technologies, nor probably can be.

Our preliminary assumption when planning the research was that some of the respondents might have had difficulties in interpreting (or even understanding) the complex questions in the ESS with reference to democracy. Moreover, some questions could have given rise to various subjective interpretations. We believe that if our hypotheses are true, we should take into consideration these uncertainties when analyzing and interpreting the data, remaining aware of the interpretational limits and traps that may bias seemingly objective results.

2. Theoretical considerations

There is an immense amount of literature about the problems of international survey- and attitude research, but we emphasize only two important aspects here. One concerns the difficulty of creating a multilingual questionnaire, while the other relates to the attitudes of respondents that raise concern about the reliability of answers.

2.1 Difficulties with a multilingual questionnaire

Various factors may influence the reliability and validity of responses to survey questionnaire items (Krosnick, 2018). Obviously, the validity of measurement of an attitude depends primarily on the wording of the question (Chessa and Holleman, 2007; Oskamp and Schultz, 2005, Saris et al., 2010). In the case of international surveys, the quality of any translation is just as important (Dorer, 2015; McGorry, 2000). The ESS is one of the most thoroughly planned and controlled surveys from this point of view. After initial wording of the preliminary items, a question goes through seven steps before entering into the questionnaire of the given country, including preliminary testing across various countries and languages that applies the qualitative methodology of cognitive interviewing (where interviewees are asked to explain with regard to each question what exactly they had in mind when interpreting the question and why they chose the given response). As part of the quality pre-check process, an analytical technique – Survey Quality Predictor (SQP) – uses a continuously expanding international database and various metadata about the questions to create a prognosis of the 'quality' of the questions and answer categories. All this effort is aimed at measuring opinions and attitudes with the highest possible accuracy, and minimizing the risks of interpretational problems (Saris and Gallhofer, 2007). However, this does not mean that such questions are perfect (one can hardly say such things in the world of surveys) because it is impossible to avoid all the difficulties of adapting original, often abstract concepts to the various nations and shifts in the social context (since it takes 2–3 years from the first concept of the questionnaire to the time of collection of data).

2.2 Difficulties with measuring attitudes quantitatively: When people give the 'wrong' answers

Even an almost perfect question and an even more perfect translation does not guarantee that answers will be reliable and valid. Academic literature speaks about the interviewer effect, referring to the bias inherent in the demographic features of the interviewer (gender, age, racial or ethnic background) and their preconceptions about the topic (Groves, 1989).[1]

The other type of bias discussed in the academic literature is inherent to the actual respondent: there are numerous intentional and non-intentional behaviors that can influence the quality of the answers significantly. Here, we distinguish between general problems and those that are specifically related to the surveying of attitudes.

[1] We do not deal with this bias in this article in more depth.

The growing 'indicator-fetishism' and 'data-hunger' of governments, companies, academics and NGOs is posing problems internationally and, as a result, societies are becoming 'over-researched.' Even though commonplace, the overwhelming amount of research, the spread of multitasking (especially among the young), and a decrease in trust mean that people are becoming less and less capable of and willing to answer long questionnaires that require in-depth, intensive thinking and the formation of opinions about abstract notions. The ESS faces serious problems in this regard because it is a complex survey of social phenomena and the interviews usually take an hour, or even more. It is a significant dilemma whether respondents can manage to maintain their motivation, attention, and honesty for such long questionnaires, especially with regard to topics that presumably many of them have not previously given a thought to. This leads us to the issue of how to generate statistically interpretable respondent behaviour that does not decrease the reliability and validity of certain questions, and thus that of the whole survey.

This problem has been researched by many, and in various ways (see e.g. Schwartz and Sudman, 1992, Groves et al., 2002; Saris and Sniderman, 2004; Kamoen et al., 2018). In this paper we only examine the distortions inherent to answers that involve using a scale to respond to questions about attitudes. Table 1 summarizes the most characteristic problems and their possible consequences for the quality of data. We distinguish between two basic types of issues: 1) the respondent does not give a substantive answer and indicates that they have no opinion about the subject matter ('Don't know' answers) or refuses to provide an answer for some other reason; and, 2) the respondent chooses a clear answer from the scale but the validity of this choice is questionable.

Table 1. Basic types of respondent behaviour that threaten the reliability and validity of attitude surveys

		Respondent behaviors that threaten reliability	Pattern	Consequence
Respondent behaviour follows a systematic pattern	YES	No answer or "Don't know" answer	-	Lack of data
		Excessive agreement with statements	○○○○○●●	Higher average, decrease in the difference between variables
		Excessive disagreement with statements	●●○○○○○	Lower average, decrease in the difference between variables
		Excessive and systematic use of middle values	○○○●○○○	Approximation to average parameters, decrease in variance, decrease in the difference between variables

		Respondent behaviors that threaten reliability	Pattern	Consequence
	NO	Excessive and systematic use of extreme values	●○○○○○●	Increase in variance, increase in difference between variables
		Systematic avoidance of extreme values	○●●●●●○	Decrease in the difference between variables, approximation to average parameters
		Lack of motivation, random answers	○○○○○○○	False results
		(False) conformity with socially acceptable answers	○○○○○○○	Approximation to expected average, decrease in variance, increase in the relations of variables

The reasons for giving no answer can be complex. Respondents might be under-motivated or simply do not want to consider the question and thus refuse to answer. Also, it is possible that they are willing to answer, but do not understand the question and feels that it is inappropriate to start a debate with the interviewer. If a respondent understands the question, they still might not have enough information to form an opinion with regard to the topic. Alternatively, the respondent may have so much information that they have a detailed opinion, but the answers on the scale do not reflect the complexity of their opinion or attitude. The respondent can also have an opinion they do not wish to share for some reason.

All in all, it is very difficult to identify the exact reasons for this type of data gap. One might follow up the various interview situations using statistical analysis (involving the personality of the interviewer, the circumstances of the interview, the demographics of the respondent, the individual and the overall patterns of data gaps) which factors may help to highlight systematic errors in the questions and the interviews, but this information mostly only helps with designing future surveys.[2]

Even when definite answers are given to questions we cannot be satisfied because the existence of an answer does not guarantee its quality. There can be several reasons for giving an answer that is 'wrong' from a researcher's point of view. Some of these reasons are very similar to the ones we have discussed with reference to the lack of answers. Under-motivation can be present in a refusal to answer, but it is even more problematic when it appears in the form of giving random answers. Also, one does not necessarily have to understand a question or have an attitude in relation to a subject to choose a response option from the scale, leading to the provision of false data. A key issue discussed in the literature is the problem of how to manage or avoid situations such as when the respondent does not really have an opinion about the given topic, but during the interview eventually 'develops' one. The main problem

[2] This question is amplified in Pillók (2010).

with this phenomenon is that researchers become part of a 'mental coin flip' (Converse, 1964), meaning that respondents produce an opinion or attitude in the course of an interview to meet the presumed expectations of the interviewer, or in other words, they simply provide evaluations of (to them) non-existent policy issues (Bishop et al., 1984; 1986). Others frame this behaviour in terms of a process of cognitive opinion-making; namely, a phenomenon whereby the respondent does not have enough information about the subject matter, but by applying knowledge and opinions concerning other fields that are deemed relevant 'produces' an opinion (Schuman and Presser, 1980; Sturgis and Smith, 2010) that can be labeled satisfying. (Krosnick, 1991). Respondent behaviour can also be affected by a desire for conformity with social expectations and a conscious or unconscious approximation of mainstream or emotionally safe, socially acceptable answers.

The positive and negative wording of statements also influence responses. The potential bias involved in using negative vs. positive question polarity, and unipolar vs. bipolar questions is another major concern when studying attitudes. There is evidence that negative questions are more difficult to process and take more processing effort than their positive equivalents. It is presumed that negative statements have to be cognitively converted into positives before they are understood and judged (Kaup et al., 2006).

All these distortions in respondent behaviors are hard to pinpoint systematically in the data, because the answers have no certain direction. There may be cases, however, when the use of answer scales for questions about attitudes show systematic bias. For example, such a bias may involve excessive agreement ('yea-saying'), or excessive disagreement that reflects a false preference for extreme values. The opposite of such answering behaviour can also happen: when the respondent systematically leans towards medium values (i.e. does not have an opinion or does not want to share it) and avoids extremes. The statistical consequence of these problems manifests itself in the distortion of the average and the variance, while in the case of a multi-item attitude survey the variables may show invalid covariance. The statistical consequences of these systematic distortions are summed up in Table 1.

3. The Methodology of the Survey

3.1 Democracy-related items in the ESS questionnaire

From the very start, the European Social Survey, in addition to the five question modules of the core questionnaire (repeated identically in each round; that is, every second year), has always included two varying questionnaire modules that inquire about specific key topics relevant to European societies. One of the rotating questionnaire modules of Round 6 in 2012 investigated attitudes towards democracy (*Understanding and evaluating democracy*).[3] We used 2x14 questions from the almost 50 questions (variables) of this questionnaire block to analyze aspects of response and data reliability and validity. The former asked about expectations and ideals regarding democracy (henceforth: abstract context) and opinions about the Hungarian situation for the same dimensions (henceforth: concrete context).

[3] This rotating module was repeated in the ninth round of ESS in 2018/2019.

The attitudes we examined were captured using the following statement: (1) 'Using this card, please tell me how important you think it is for democracy in general,' and (2) 'Using this card, please tell me to what extent you think each of the following statements applies in Hungary.'[4]

The items in the question block we examined were the following:[5]

1. National elections are free and fair.
2. Voters discuss politics with people they know before deciding how to vote.
3. Different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another.
4. Opposition parties are free to criticize the government.
5. The media are free to criticize the government.
6. The media provide citizens with reliable information to judge the government.
7. The rights of minority groups are protected.
8. Citizens have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums.
9. The courts treat everyone the same.
10. Governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job.
11. The government protects all citizens against poverty.
12. The government explains its decisions to voters.
13. The government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels.
14. Politicians take into account the views of other European governments before making decisions.

The ESS fieldwork in Hungary took place between November, 2012 and January, 2013 and the sample included 2014 respondents. All questions had to be answered using a scale of 0–10, but respondents could refuse to give an answer or indicate 'Don't know.' For the items concerning the abstract context the smallest element on the scale (0) was labeled 'Not at all important for democracy in general,' while the largest number (10) was considered 'Extremely important for democracy in general.' For the concrete (national) context the corresponding two extreme values of the scale shown to the survey respondents were described as 'Does not apply at all' and 'Applies completely', respectively. The interview was administered face to face using the CAPI (computer-aided-personal-interviewing) method – that is, the interviewer asked the questions and registered the answers on a laptop. It is important to mention that respondents were always provided with a show card that contained the values between 0 and 10 and the associated labels.

[4] During the interviews, first all the statements related to Question 1 were asked, and then the same questions regarding the situation in Hungary.

[5] The original variable names of the items in the ESS database were the following: (1) fairelc, dspplvt, dfprtal, oppcrgv, medcrgv, meprinf, rghmgpr, votedir, cttresa, gptpelc, gvctzpv, gvexpdc, grdfinc, pltavie (*14 variables for general expectations*), illetve (2) fairelcc, dspplvtc, dfprtalc, oppcrgvc, medcrgvc, meprinfc, rghmgprc, votedirc, cttresac, gptpelcc, gvctzpvc, gvexpdcc, grdfincc, pltaviec (*14 variables for the concrete Hungarian situation*).

3.2 Focus group research

Additionally, we conducted focus group research after the survey was completed in order to examine the cognitive structures, the interpretational difficulties, the ambiguities and the possibly misleading connotations of the concepts that might have occurred in the Hungarian context. A total of four focus groups were organized in Budapest and Ajka (a mid-size town in western Hungary) in June 2014. At both locations separate groups were arranged for low- and high-status participants. Status was defined by highest level of education. All participants of the high-status groups had finished tertiary education, while those in the lower status groups had completed primary and secondary education. The age and gender composition of the participants was balanced, but no participants were younger than 25 years old or older than 65. Prior to the focus groups, the political attitudes and party preferences of the participants were not examined. Focus groups lasted 90 minutes. After participants introduced themselves, their first task was to individually fill out the section of the ESS questionnaire on democracy, and indicate how difficult it was to answer each of the items. The group discussion was primarily devoted to a discussion of the statements in detail, one by one, with the moderator.

3.3 Defining the problem within the framework of research

During the analysis of the database we made the preliminary assumption that participants who were in some sense unsure when interpreting a statement in the democracy block either:

a) had not answered the question, or answered it with 'Don't know';
b) had answered the question by choosing the middle, neutral value of the scale;[6]
c) had answered the question, but whose answers – compared to those of other respondents – correlated differently to other questions.

Naturally, all the above possibilities could have happened for other reasons too, but we assumed that if we experienced all three of the above-mentioned phenomena with regard to a statement it would confirm the suspicion that the respondents (or some of them) had difficulties interpreting the statement.

In addition, we had the unique opportunity to examine each statement in different interpretational contexts; namely, regarding its (1) importance to democracy in general (abstract context), and (2) its realization in Hungary (concrete context). Thus, it was possible to further differentiate the issue of interpretation:

1. If there were signs of ambiguity with regard to a statement in both contexts, this could mean that its wording *per se* had caused difficulties.
2. If the interpretational difficulties only appeared in the abstract context but not in the concrete context we can assume that the concrete references helped with understanding the question, and thus evaluating the Hungarian situation was less problematic than making the evaluation in the abstract context.

[6] Naturally, this was differentiated from the well-known phenomenon of regression towards the mean.

3. In other cases we considered that the statement might be difficult to interpret in the Hungarian context either because it was less relevant to this context, or because the respondents had difficulties forming an attitude to it.

We applied different statistical tools to measure each of the above three phenomenon.

1. No answer was measured by the lack of data (i.e. 'Don't know' answers or refusals).
2. When measuring neutral values that occurred due to the respondents' ambiguity, we made two preliminary assumptions with regard to their frequency:
a. One was based on the assumption that the attitude questions have more or less normal variance, thus the average and the distribution can be used as parameters to determine the expected frequency of the neutral (middle) value.
b. We also assumed that the variance of the answers could be characterized by their unimodal distribution, thus the frequency of the answers would strictly monotonously decrease from the most frequent in both directions. In this case, the expected frequency of the neutral value was approximated by the average of the two neighbouring values if the average was not close to the neutral value.
3. In the case of the third phenomenon – when the covariance of the statements showed some disorder – we assumed that the statements measured some kind of latent attitude in both contexts that could be called a 'democracy attitude.' In these cases, we performed a reliability analysis. We considered the items as one index and assumed that the lower item index correlations could have occurred due to interpretational problems.

4. Results

4.1 Lack of answers in the data

In examining the simple distribution of 'Don't know' answers and the lack of answers with regard to each item we found that in both groups of questions (the abstract and the concrete) the proportion of those who *refused to answer* was relatively stable, but in the case of questions related to the concrete Hungarian situation there were always 1.5–1 percentage points more such responses (Figure 1).

Decidedly larger differences were seen in the '*Don't know*' answers: in the case of the ideal democracy items they ranged between 1.6 per cent and 5.8 per cent, while regarding the Hungarian situation the share of 'don't know' answers varied between 3.3 per cent and 11.4 per cent. This means that in the case of all democracy items there were more respondents who did not give valid answers regarding the situation in Hungary. It is difficult to determine why respondents chose one of these two answers, but it ultimately may not be too important to know the reason. In the ideal case, refusal to answer indicates a strong opinion, whereas a 'Don't know' answer suggests a lack of information that results in indecision. However, this is by no means certain, as the proportion of refusals might depend on the interviewing techniques and culture of the interviewers.

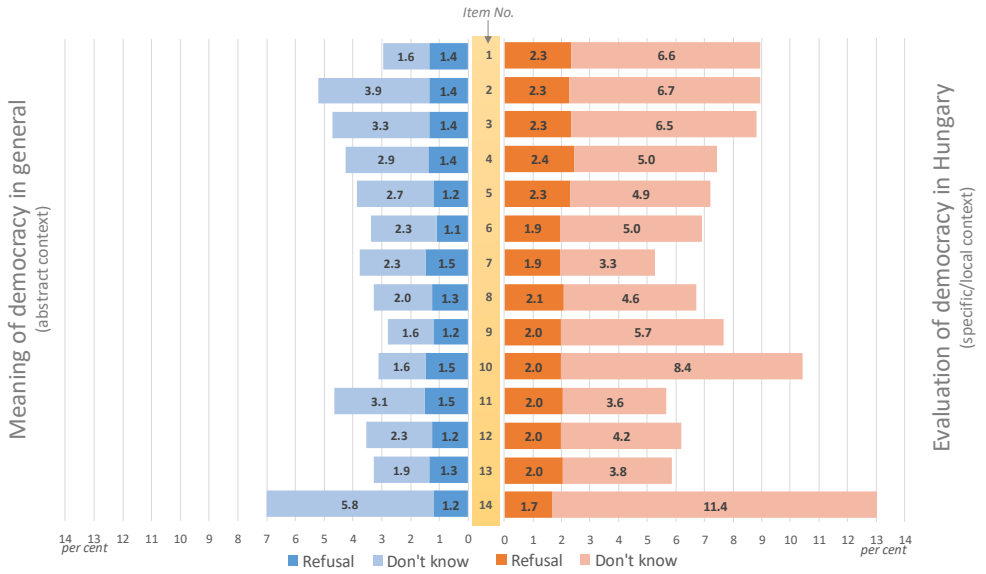

Figure 1. Proportion of 'Don't know' answers and refusals to answer questions regarding concrete and abstract aspects of democracy.
Item numbers are in the same order as the above-mentioned items in the ESS questionnaire and the database

Examining the two types of data gap together, 73.2 per cent of respondents gave an answer ranging between 0 and 10 to the 2x14 questions, meaning that 26.8 per cent of them gave a 'no answer' (NA) or a 'don't know' answer (DK) to at least one of the questions.

4.2 The quest for exaggerated 'neutrality'

Based on the theoretical, assumed distribution (normal and unimodal) of the answers, we summed up the proportion of those who refused to answer for some reason and the surplus answers of the neutral category, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Indices showing ambiguity in an abstract and concrete context and their differences (assuming a normal and unimodal distribution of answers, respectively) (ESS, 2012, Hungarian data) *

Democracy item	Democracy in general		In Hungary		Difference	
	normal distribution	unimodal distribution	normal distribution	unimodal distribution	normal distribution	unimodal distribution
National elections are free and fair	4.21%	3.50%	9.44%	13.98%	5.23%	10.48%
Voters discuss politics with people they know before deciding how to vote.	5.36%	8.09%	11.52%	16.31%	6.16%	8.22%

Different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another.	7.08%	6.56%	12.37%	16.83%	5.29%	10.27%
Opposition parties are free to criticize the government.	5.77%	5.95%	8.09%	12.32%	2.32%	6.37%
The media are free to criticize the government.	6.19%	7.49%	6.78%	10.75%	0.58%	3.26%
The media provide citizens with reliable information to judge the government.	5.03%	4.57%	10.00%	13.57%	4.98%	9.00%
The rights of minority groups are protected.	4.66%	6.80%	5.33%	9.28%	0.66%	2.48%
Citizens have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums.	5.59%	5.23%	9.37%	13.78%	3.79%	8.55%
The courts treat everyone the same.	5.15%	3.79%	12.94%	17.43%	7.79%	13.65%
Governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job.	5.93%	6.18%	10.12%	14.80%	4.18%	8.62%
The government protects all citizens against poverty.	3.67%	3.72%	4.37%	8.46%	0.70%	4.74%
The government explains its decisions to voters.	4.75%	4.67%	6.32%	10.78%	1.57%	6.11%
The government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels.	3.99%	3.34%	6.59%	10.80%	2.60%	7.45%
Politicians take into account the views of other European governments before making decisions.	10.09%	13.63%	16.85%	21.00%	6.76%	7.37%

* The shading of each cell was determined according to the minimum and maximum values of the columns - darker shades indicate higher values.

What is most striking in the results is that the concrete context (questions like 'To what extent do you think this statement applies in Hungary?') caused more ambiguity than the abstract context (questions like 'How important do you think it is for democracy in general?') This tendency was apparent in the case of each examined item, and some of the questions showed explicitly significant differences. This result accords with the tendencies found during the analysis of missing answers.

We cannot determine the reasons for this phenomenon, but we can form hypotheses. Further detailed statistical analysis would be needed to verify these, and even this might not be successful. However, we can assume that this finding is the result of some special attitudes: for example, the concealment of opinions regarding the Hungarian situation. We can also take the risk of assuming that many of the respondents have no mature opinion with regard to some of the items because these issues do not appear in public discourse.

4.3 The correlation of answers to each item

After the former finding of presumable concealment, or 'lack of attitude,' let us see how complex the system of correlations is among the democracy items. We assumed that since these questions had a deep theoretical founding and were rigorously tested, they could be used as components of composite indices that reflect general expectations towards democracy and the opinions of citizens regarding the functioning of democracy in their country. If there were no interpretational problems we could assume that there was a coherent image of the 'ideal democracy' and no extreme discrepancies among these items concerning opinions about the functioning of democracy in specific countries either. But in the presence of statements that did not fit the overall image, we presumed that the interpretation of these items was problematic. The numerical results that represent this train of thought are summed up in Table 3, where interpretational ambiguities were approximated by changes of structure in the correlations of opinions regarding certain statements. The items of the abstract and concrete dimensions were used to create a simple index where correlations with each item were calculated by leaving out the value of the given item.

Table 3. Reliability check (corrected item-index correlation; index without the given item)

Democracy item	Democracy in general	In Hungary
	.749	.607
National elections are free and fair	.513	.456
Voters discuss politics with people they know before deciding how to vote.	.766	.640
Different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another.	.724	.568
Opposition parties are free to criticize the government.	.676	.671
The media are free to criticize the government.	.778	.629

Democracy item	Democracy in general	In Hungary
The media provide citizens with reliable information to judge the government.	.607	.506
The rights of minority groups are protected.	.751	.729
Citizens have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums.	.718	.590
The courts treat everyone the same.	.651	.604
Governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job.	.637	.706
The government protects all citizens against poverty.	.714	.765
The government explains its decisions to voters.	.645	.718
The government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels.	.262	.548

Results show that regarding the general principles of democracy, the interpretation of the statements 'Voters discuss politics with people they know before deciding how to vote' and 'Politicians take into account the views of other European governments before making decisions' do not fit the responses given to the other fourteen items. These two questions were also associated with the highest proportion of answer gaps (don't know / no answer): while the proportion in the case of all the other items was 3–4.5 per cent, it was 5.3 per cent and 7.4 per cent for these two items. Regarding responses to questions assessing the Hungarian situation, in addition to the above, three further statements seemed to deviate from the rest of the items: 'The rights of minority groups are protected,' 'Opposition parties are free to criticize the government,' and 'The courts treat everyone the same.'

5. Interpretation of the results based on focus-group research

The focus group research inquired into the interpretation of the 16 items in the democracy questionnaire block and tried to identify difficulties with understanding as well as differences in interpretation. The results of the statistical analysis and the focus group discussion jointly pinpointed four groups of items in terms of understanding and interpretations issues.

5.1 Understandable, unambiguous items

The first group consists of 'understandable items' that show a low level of ambiguity in every context. Based on the statistical and qualitative research, the statement 'The government explains its decisions to voters' is easy to understand and assess according to all three indices. However, the focus group research showed that while all respondents thought this was very important with regard to democracy in general, there was no consensus with regard to how much it is the situation in Hungary. Several people believed that it was not the case in Hungary, while others thought that the

government explained its decisions, but not always in a comprehensible way. The most common opinion was that the government tries to explain only the beneficial outcomes of its decisions, so even if it gives explanations they are not always trustworthy. This means that it was not found to be difficult to understand the question, but that the term 'explain' could be interpreted in different ways: either as political communication, or as providing explanations that citizens understand and trust.

Based on the statistical analysis, the statement 'The government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels' belongs to this category. This item generated more debate in the focus group research. Everybody agreed that the principle of reducing differences was important, but people differed in their opinions about the level to which a democratic government should reduce these. The debate in the focus group that included upper-middle-class people concluded that income differences were necessary as long as they reflected differences in performance. The question is thus on what grounds and to what extent the state should intervene in reducing income differences. Regardless of settlement and status, all participants agreed that the Hungarian situation does not meet this expectation. During the discussion of this topic, the affluence of politicians was often mentioned with participants stating that, based on their accomplishments, politicians earned way more than they deserved. In sum, this question was not difficult to understand and interpret; however, providing a proper answer would have necessitated defining what 'government measures' mean in this respect.

5.2 Items that were understood but interpreted in different ways

Three questions belong to this category. The statistical analysis found low ambiguity in both the concrete and the abstract contexts for these items, but the results of the focus group research showed some contradiction with the statistical analysis. The statements 'The rights of minority groups are protected', 'The government protects all citizens against poverty,' and 'The media are free to criticize the government' are examples of this category. The protection of the rights of minority groups and the issue of how important this is for democracy caused significant debate in some groups. Participants mostly (but not unanimously) agreed that it was an important element of democracy, but there were significant differences in defining what the concept of minorities meant. Some associated the term with ethnic origins (Albanian, Romanian, Russian), others associated it with the thirteen historical national minorities of Hungary (such as Schwabs, Slovaks, Serbs, etc.), some with ethnic minority groups (Roma), and some with religious groups (such as Jews). Some people associated the term minority with social disadvantages or physical handicaps, while others defined it in terms of social status ('the downtrodden, the poor'). Some groups simply defined it in numerical terms ('those who are fewer in number,' 'any minority means that their number is less than others'). This question showed how a seemingly simple question and the terms often used in everyday discourse may be interpreted in very different ways, signifying very different population groups.

Another issue of interpretation concerning this item relates to understanding of the term 'minority rights.' What are minority rights? And why should minorities have different rights? The debates showed that interpretations varied according to the

demographic characteristics and political sympathies of the respondents. We may presume that even those who answered this question might have had different groups and different concepts of rights in their minds when they responded.

The statement that 'The government protects all citizens against poverty' caused similar, though slightly less interpretational ambiguities. Based on the statistical analysis this item was not problematic at all, but focus group discussions revealed that the word 'all' generated interpretational problems. During the debates participants mentioned several social groups and poverty-related factors that they did not feel solidarity with, such as those who did not want to work due to different kinds of addition (alcohol or gambling). The other dilemma that was mentioned in some of the groups concerned, irrespective of how much one agreed with the former statement, to what extent state protection from poverty is an essential condition of democracy. Many participants argued that this task was the responsibility of the state during the communist era, but this is not the case in today's democracies.

5.3 Items lacking clarity

This group consist of items that showed a high level of ambiguity and proved to be 'potentially uninterpretable' according to all three statistical analyses and the focus group research. Items such as 'Politicians take into account the views of other European governments before making decisions,' 'Governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job,' and 'Voters discuss politics with people they know before deciding how to vote' belong to this category.

Focus group discussions showed the reasons for the interpretational difficulties. Participants were clearly very troubled by the idea that it was important for democracy that politicians should take into account the views of other European governments before making decisions. Why should they take these into account, and whose views should they consider? Does this question refer to the European Union? What does it have to do with democracy? Some of the participants mentioned that it never does any harm to take the opinions of others into account, but this should not necessarily influence the decisions of the government. Another group mentioned that the subject matter of the decision was an important issue here: whether the issue under debate influenced other countries, or countries of the European Union, or only the given state. Some participants mentioned 'the values of the EU' and claimed that as long as the decision did not go against the basic values of the EU, other governments should not have the right to intervene.

The statement 'Governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job' also generated interpretational problems during the discussions. Here, the various connotations of the word 'punish' caused significant ambiguity. The socioeconomic status of the group appeared to be significant. Participants of the higher status group associated the word with voting during national elections and the possibility of overthrowing the government (thus, some kind of 'political punishment'), whereas participants of the lower status groups employed a wider and more direct interpretation of the term. They mainly mentioned criminal accountability and, beyond that, moral, financial, or even physical punishment. Some of the respondents even mentioned the possibility of life imprisonment and capital punishment. The

debate showed that social status may influence interpretation of the term 'punishment' and cause significant inconsistency in the answers.[7]

The qualitative research revealed two types of problems with the statement 'Voters discuss politics with people they know before deciding how to vote.' Some participants wondered what this had to do with democracy: 'This question is totally senseless'; 'I think this sentence fragment has nothing to do with democracy. No matter if it is a democracy, a dictatorship, an empire or a monarchy, I am going to discuss [these issues] with my family – or not'; 'An opinion is like one's arse. Everybody has one, but this does not necessarily mean you want to see others'.' These answers show that many people do not think that open political discourse is a condition of democracy. The other problem is connected to the present Hungarian situation. Many people are afraid, and some of them shared their experience of how discussing political topics had led to severe conflict within the family and circle of friends. 'Well, I have heard of families that fell apart because of such stupid things.' Although many participants confirmed that it is important to talk about politics because different information and points of view can help us understand problems, many believed that it was not worth the risk of personal and family conflict.

5.4 Diverse types

The statements we categorized as diverse can be best described as ones that are difficult to interpret in the Hungarian context. The statements 'National elections are free and fair'; 'Different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another'; 'Courts treat everyone the same,' and 'The media are free to criticize the government' belong in this category. These items produced the highest variation in response in abstract and concrete contexts (that is, in how important they are ideally, and how much they actually apply to Hungary).

There was general agreement that all four items were essential for democracy. However, discussion of the statement 'National elections are free and fair' in the focus group raised the issue that the item contained actually two questions, one relating to free elections, the other to fair voting. Participants mentioned some ambiguity about the latter in the Hungarian context. Some questioned the fairness of the present electoral law, gerrymandering, regulations about the organized transportation of voters, and political promises and gifts to voters. Many participants had difficulty interpreting the question, because while they thought that elections were free in Hungary, the circumstances of voting were not fair. This 'two-in-one' wording thus caused interpretational problems and signified differences between the 'ideal' situation and its 'concrete' Hungarian realization.

In contrast to the results of the statistical analysis, the focus group discussions did not reveal interpretational problems concerning the item 'Different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another.' All four focus groups agreed that while this was very important for democracy, it is not the reality in Hungary. The political parties do not offer alternative visions, 'they merely differ in how they blame each other.' We had similar experiences regarding the item about equality at the courts.

[7] Not to mention the fact that the international context and cultural connotations of the English word 'punish' can cause severe interpretational and comparative problems.

The focus group discussions revealed that participants had no interpretational problems with the question, but felt that there was a huge gap between the importance of the principle and the Hungarian situation. There was general agreement that the former was an essential condition of democracy, but the treatment of several cases and groups were mentioned which involved violation of this principle: the Roma, everyday people, politicians and celebrities were treated differently at court: while the latter two groups were not punished even for great crimes, the former two could be sent to prison even for minor offenses. We may presume that the ambiguity shown by the statistical analysis reflects some level of concealment of opinion in the case of the above two items.

The statement 'The media are free to criticize the government' also raised interpretational challenges. While participants agreed that this is essential in an ideal democracy, their opinions about the Hungarian situation were widely variable. Members of the group from Budapest were unanimous in their opinion that the media was not free in Hungary, but there were heated debates in other groups. Some participants argued that 'everybody is free to express their opinion' and claimed that there were several forms of media that 'could operate freely despite continuously criticizing the government.' Others mentioned examples of when the media was put under political pressure. Focus group discussions highlighted three issues concerning the interpretation of this item: 1) the necessity of differentiating between public and commercial media; 2) the question whether 'freedom of media' allows the expression of the critical opinions of journalists or only objective facts; 3) differences between the formal, legal conditions of a free media and actual practice. The dilemma here was whether freedom of the media is limited to the formal, legal framework, or also to practice of the political pressure that is put on media-related employees.

6. Conclusions

An important feature of the ESS and other similar, large-scale international comparative surveys is that their data and full documentation are available to all. As for the ESS, its complex results and data are used in various fields of politics and policy making as sources of basic social indicators (which is also the main goal of the survey project), and serve as data sources for academic research too. Their data also serve to feed the hunger for data of the business world, NGOs, and the media. However, these data users very rarely question the reliability and validity of such data. The former usually just accept the validity of the data because ESS is truly one of the most professionally sound, carefully designed and managed projects in the field of international comparative surveys. Our short analysis has focused on Hungary, but its train of thought could be expanded to other countries too. However, here we hoped to point out that, despite all efforts, interpretational difficulties can still exist even in data collection processes as carefully designed and controlled as the ESS, and these might cause challenges with interpreting results, especially in international comparison.

As a general conclusion, we can say that there were hardly any items in the democracy block of the ESS R6 questionnaire that would pass both the 'soft' and 'hard' test of validity and reliability that we applied in our research. There were no items that were equally easy to understand and interpret in both the abstract and the

concrete Hungarian contexts. In some cases, respondents may have interpreted the questions in significantly different ways – for example, regarding items related to minorities (7), the media (6), and the punishment of politicians (10). The reliability of the data is further eroded by the fact that in the cases of these items the proportion of answer gaps was average, or less than average. This means that respondents were 'willing' to give answers even if they did not understand or were not sure about the meaning of the questions. In other cases, however, both the quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed interpretational problems in assessing the Hungarian situation compared to the abstract context. This fact was indicated by a higher proportion of gaps in the data, inconsistencies in the internal structure of data, and the less exact, but very informative conclusions of the focus groups.

The questionnaire module we examined contained various elements (terms and phenomena) that had widely accepted theoretical foundations but were difficult to interpret in the Hungarian situation. We may assume that certain concepts were used by the questionnaire which were thought to be universal and unambiguous, but whose interpretations proved not to be independent of the social and political culture of the given community. This is especially true with questions about democracy, because even European countries differ widely in their traditions and values in this respect. This means that we cannot be sure if the answers given to the same questions in the United Kingdom, Sweden, Portugal, Greece or Hungary refer to totally identical notions.

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