

A multicultural understanding of Democracy

Interpretations of Democracy by Christian migrants

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Introduction

The cultural landscape of the 'Western world' is changing. Multiple waves of migration have led to the arrival of many non-Western communities in West European democracies (Minkenberg, 2007, pp. 895-899). The Netherlands is one of those democratic destinations. These migration developments have transformed Dutch society into a multicultural society. Multiculturalism has had a forceful impact on the political agenda and cultural life in Dutch society, but has also caused an increase of social tension (Rath, 2009). Critics of the multicultural society have expressed doubts about the possibility to maintain national unity and democratic stability in a multicultural environment (Alexander, 2013, pp. 542-547). In academic circles multiple concerns have been raised on the issue of democracy in a multicultural context: in several countries social diversity has been shown to decrease organizational membership and political engagement (Kesler & Bloemraad, 2010). Furthermore, people in host societies often worry about immigrants' level of adaptation to democracy and their loyalty to democratic values (Bilodeau, McAllister & Kanji, 2010).

Often the public debate on this issue is characterized by conceptual incongruity; critiques are frequently directed at all migrants, while they are discussed as a monolithic group. In reality however, the various migrant groups originate from vastly different countries. Not only do those different backgrounds determine the cultural gap that must be bridged between migrant and the host society, they also shape people's relationship with democracy. Previous research has indicated that the level of democracy in the home state influences people's attitudes towards democracy. Migrants from more autocratic states tend to be more accepting of autocratic systems as alternatives to democracy compared to those out of democratic states (Bilodeau, McAllister & Kanji, 2010, pp. 146-150). It suggests that different introductions to- and different histories with democracy generate a lasting effect on people's perception of the democratic system. It is therefore important to acquire a clear understanding of migrants' perception of democracy. Thus, the question remains why some migrants are more open to different systems than democracy, while other migrants regard democracy as the only acceptable political system. The main question on which this study focuses reads: *How do migrants in Dutch society define democracy?* In order to compare the research population solely on the basis of national background, I have removed religion from the equation. I therefore focus the study on Christian migrants only.

I discuss the concept of democracy with four groups of Christian migrants. Questions are directed at respondents' opinions on what a democratic system should entail, how the relationship between government and citizenry should be arranged, how the relationship between religion and democracy should be arranged, how the democratic system compares to other political systems and whether democracy should be universally implemented. The objective of the study is to provide insight in the democratic attitudes of migrants in the Netherlands and their appreciation of democratic principles.

Theoretic literature

Democratic attitudes among migrants

Several studies have pointed out that political attitudes and political activity among migrants are influenced by political socialization in their country of origin. Gitelman shows in a comparison between Jewish immigrants in Israel of American and Soviet origin, that American Jews are more trustful of the government, while Soviet Jews are more inclined to respect the authorities, in line with political attitudes in both respective home countries (1982). A study among formerly politically active immigrants in Canada found that political participation in the host country was highest among people originating from established democratic societies, and lowest among migrants from societies which almost completely lacked any democratic heritage (Black, 1987, pp. 744-745). Research among different migrant groups in Berlin showed that migrants from the more democratic Italy always higher rates of interest and participation in German politics, compared to migrants from the less democratic countries Russia and Turkey (Berger, Galonska & Koopmans, 2004). Not only the level, also the nature of democratic integration and participation differs, depending on country of origin. Research among ten immigrant groups in the United States showed that migrants from different national backgrounds responded differently to their new democratic environment (Bueker, 2005). Migrants from China, former Soviet-states and the Southeast-Asian region were more likely to naturalize but less likely to vote after naturalization compared to migrants from Britain, Canada and Mexico (Bueker, 2005).

On the issue of support for democracy, existent literature reveals unambiguously that the overwhelming majority of migrants supports a democratic form of government (Bilodeau, 2014). Research among immigrants in Australia shows that in every separate migrant group the concept of democracy is highly valued by the majority (Bilodeau, 2014). However, this support can vary in its nature. To many migrants democracy is the only game in town. But the level of support for alternative systems to democracy varies between groups. Again, political attitudes within migrant groups often match with political attitudes in the country of origin. In states that lack an established democratic tradition, percentages of support for autocratic or technocratic systems are significantly higher compared to democratic societies (Bilodeau, 2014, p. 373). Accordingly, a 2007 study on Australia showed that migrants originating from authoritarian countries seem more accepting of authoritarian systems than migrants originating from more democratic countries (Bilodeau, McAllister & Kanji, 2010). A study in Canada discovered identical findings to the Australian case. Again, it showed that migrants from authoritarian countries saw more acceptable alternatives to democracy than migrants from democratic countries (Bilodeau & Nevitte, 2007). Residence in non-democratic states prior to migration therefore seems to influence political attitudes after migration. Research in Spain and Romania has shown how the socialization dynamics of both democratic and autocratic eras of government have influenced contemporary generations in their perception of democracy (Voicu & Peral, 2014). Generations born during dictatorial periods registered lower approval ratings of democracy compared to generations born during democratic periods (Voicu & Peral, 2014, p.568). This shows how early socialization affects the ways in which people look at political systems. Through socialization processes in the home country people shape their perceptions of democracy. Those migrants born in democracies do tend to regard democracy as the best possible system of politics. People's openness to non-democratic systems of politics in authoritarian states can however go together with support for democratic ideals; in other words, for some, support of both democratic and non-democratic systems can coexist and is not mutually exclusive (McAllister & Makkai, 1992, pp. 290-291). As mentioned above, although approval ratings of democracy are high among every migrant group, to some it is not the only acceptable system of politics (Bilodeau, McAllister & Kanji, 2010, pp. 146-150). This finding suggests that those who maintain exclusive support for democracy and those who support democracy among a range of other

systems hold different views of democracy's level of superiority and desirability compared to other political systems.

All of the above points to the conclusion that migrants from different countries maintain different conceptualizations of democracy, whilst in all groups the majority of people supports democracy. That signifies the importance to investigate how people precisely define democracy, and which components of democracy they value as fundamental. A deeper understanding of differences in interpretation of democracy may shed light on people's rationale behind their differences in political attitude, adaptation and activity.

Studies on country of origin-socialization have primarily focused on first-generation migrants. The second generation is often considered to be primarily influenced by the host country, as it is their country of birth and provides the environment in which they mature. It seems therefore reasonable to assume that second-generation migrants are primarily influenced by socialization factors in the host country. In the case of migrants however, this might be different. Research indicates that a substantial number of first-generation migrants successfully transmits their political attitudes to their children (Jennings, 1984). This pattern has for instance been discovered in the case of voting behavior (Spierings, 2016) and in some instances on the issue of gender-role attitudes (Kretschmer, 2018; Kulik, 2002), and is also reflected in levels of social trust among both first- and second-generation migrants (Moschion & Tabasso, 2014). Furthermore, higher levels of parental involvement in- and interaction with the home state strengthens cultural links between second generation migrants and their familial country of origin (Soehl & Waldinger, 2012). Family-socialization therefore mitigates the effect of public socialization among second-generation migrants. It is therefore reasonable to expect that experiences and attitudes among first-generation migrants are (at least partly) shared by second-generation migrants. It is plausible that the influence of country of origin on political attitudes thus affects second-generation migrants as well. In addition to that notion, second generation non-Western migrants in the Netherlands often maintain close cultural and relational ties to their home land. Furthermore, they have often become the prime subjects of debates on the problems of multiculturalism and failed integration in recent times (Visser, 2016, p. 670). It is therefore highly relevant to include second-generation migrants in this study.

Definitions of Democracy

Democracy has been interpreted in many diverse ways, covering a wide range of definitions and models. Many of these definitions overlap in areas, and in real life few democracies purely embody a single definition, as they rather contain elements of various models (Elster, 1998, p.7). Different understandings of democracy may confuse the academic analysis of individuals' views on democracy. However, in order to aggregate individual conceptualizations of democracy, a comprised range of definitions is usually employed to distinct definitions from each other without broadening the body of literature too extensively. I will therefore include a selection of these definitions in my research design. This selection does not suffice to cover the full scope of views on democracy provided by the interviewees in the study, but does help to link their perspectives to existent literature, through which my findings can tie in to the broader analysis.

Table 1: theoretic interpretations of democracy

<i>Name</i>	Procedural	Liberal	Deliberative	Theocratic
<i>Fundamental elements</i>	Popular sovereignty	Popular sovereignty	Popular sovereignty	Popular sovereignty
	Equal citizenship	Equal citizenship	Equal citizenship	Equal citizenship
		Constitution	Constitution	Religious constitution
		Liberal freedoms	Liberal freedoms Active political participation by citizens Frequent political debate between citizens	Religious social values
<i>Process of democratic rule</i>	Majoritarian vote	Majoritarian vote, restricted by fundamental liberal principles	Majoritarian vote, restricted by fundamental liberal principles, outcomes achieved by rational deliberation among citizens	Majoritarian vote, restricted by religious law

When one merely defines democracy as the mechanism of majoritarian rule, one obtains the technically simplest form of democracy. Procedural democracy only takes into account the majority vote. It defines democracy merely as a polity consisting of equal citizens, who possess equal rights to take part in the political process and to contribute to the establishment of the majority view (Saffon & Urbinati, 2013, p.442) The principles that are required to operate this system are popular sovereignty (the people decide, whether through electing representatives or through direct democracy) and citizenship for each individual resident of the state, therefore guaranteeing every individual equal rights to participate in the democratic process. The system functions to bring into realization the preference of the majority of people and to uphold the procedural equality of individual citizens (Saffon & Urbinati, 2013, p.442). In its purely procedural form, the law is under complete authority of the (coalition) government in office, and there is no superior constitutional law which can constrain leadership, other than in case of protecting procedural democratic rights of citizens (Dworkin, 2013, pp. 25-34).

The concept of liberal democracy goes beyond the procedural aspect of democracy. In this model the principle of majoritarian rule is constrained by a number of ‘unalienable’ individual rights. A rigid constitution limits the political freedom to amend regular law, while protecting certain freedoms of citizens in the private sphere (Galston, 2018, pp. 9-11). These freedoms cannot be overruled by regular majority rule. Among these freedoms are usually recognized freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of association and freedom of press (Marcus, Mease & Ottemoeller, 2001, pp. 115-116). These unalienable rights are as fundamental to liberal democracy as the rights to political

participation. The democratic mechanism is hereby blended with liberal individualism, which ensures certain minority protections (Galston, 2018, pp. 9-11).

The third form of democracy I include in my analysis is that of deliberative democracy. The concept knows many interpretations, but in its essence this model adds the necessity of rational argument and debate among citizens to the fundamentals of democracy (Elster, 1998, pp. 8-9). Citizens are responsible to partake in public and political debate to gather knowledge about their counterparts' interests, in order to base their political decisions on careful consideration. Characteristic to this type of democracy is that political opinion is generally changed by reciprocal communication (Elster, 1998, pp. 8-9). Within this definition of democracy it is not merely the process that matters, nor the consolidation of a selection of individual freedoms. The deliberative democracy goes beyond the mere description and preservation of political rights, and prescribes through which methods the political process should be executed, in order to generate the best democratic outcome.

The theocratic democracy is another form of democracy which constrains the power of majoritarian rule, only this time not on the basis of liberal principles but on the basis of theological tenets. The democratic mechanism is incorporated in the system but it can only play its part within a limited framework, defined by the boundaries of religious law (Ben-Yehuda, 2010, pp. 6-7; Reimer, 2006, pp. 160-167). This often goes hand in hand with theological political leadership or with a prominent institutional position for organized religion (Ben-Yehuda, 2010, pp. 6-7). Although critiques may be raised about the extent to which this system qualifies as democratic, that debate does not belong to the purpose of this thesis. What separates a theocratic democracy from a theocracy is the limitation of political leadership by democratic law and the implementation of the democratic process to elect political leadership, involving popular sovereignty and majority rule. The system rests on reciprocal constraint: the democratic process is limited by fundamental religious principles, and within those boundaries leadership is constrained by the democratic will (Reimer, 2006, pp. 160-167).

Christianity and democracy

The debate on multiculturalism is often diffused with the subject of religious plurality. In order to be able to test for country of origin and to prevent any blurring of my results with religious factors, I will employ religion as a control variable in the study and focus the research on Christian migrants only. Multiple studies have found that religion in general is not significant as a determinant of support for democracy (Al-Braizat, 2002). Still, studies do show that Muslims are generally more conservative and are less supporting of liberal values in democracy. Religion can shape traditional values that people adhere to and are (sometimes) not willing to subject to the democratic process (Ben-Nun Bloom & Arikan, 2013). By concentrating on country of origin and Christians only, I reduce the effect of these religious interpretations.

Theory and hypotheses

I have included the following hypotheses in my analysis:

If people are not exclusively committed to democracy and are more open to alternative systems, one would not expect these people to maintain a deeply ideological conviction of democratic values. After all, they are open to the idea of trading the democratic system for an alternative system. Migrants out of authoritarian countries tend to be more open to alternative systems to democracy. I therefore expect that migrants out of more authoritarian states mainly define democracy in procedural terms, which reduces democracy to a mere electoral mechanism to which no further

ideals are attached, or that they are more open to a theocratic interpretation of democracy which is based upon the principles of their own religion, in which case they can also be achieve their goal through a purely theocratic state or theocratic authoritarian regime.

Hypothesis 1: Migrants out of more authoritarian states mainly define democracy according to the models of procedural or theocratic democracy

If people are exclusive in their support of democracy, one would expect these people to regard democracy as a special system, to which superior ideals are attached. After all, people are not open to the acceptance of any other system of politics. People out of more democratic states tend to be more exclusive in their support of democracy, showing great loyalty to democratic ideals. I therefore expect migrants out of more democratic states to mainly define democracy along the lines of liberal or deliberative democracy, because both of those models include a range of principles that cannot be limited or abolish and to which accordingly no alternative principles are allowed.

Hypothesis 2: Migrants out of more democratic states mainly define democracy according to the models of liberal or deliberative democracy

Exclusive support of democracy and openness to alternative systems likely coincides with people's appreciation of democracy; it seems reasonable to expect migrants from democratic states to define democracy as a superior political system which should be implemented universally, while migrants from more autocratic states regard democracy as a viable option, which applicability nevertheless varies from case to case, and who see more opportunities for alternative systems to operate.

Hypothesis 3: Migrants out of more democratic states assert that democracy should be implemented universally, while migrants out of more autocratic states are more open to the claim that the desirability of implementation of democracy varies from state to state.

Research population

For this thesis I interview Christian migrants of Syrian, Iraqi, Ghanaian and Eritrean origin¹. All the participants included in the study have migrated to the Netherlands.

I have selected these four countries on the basis of three criteria.

- Firstly, substantial migrant groups from all of these countries live in the Netherlands.
- Secondly, a substantial portion of these migrant groups adheres to the Christian faith.
- Thirdly, the level of democracy in the home country. The variance between the countries allows me to compare migrants from democratic and authoritarian states. One democratic state is included (Ghana), while three countries are classified as authoritarian, among which an authoritarian dictatorship (Eritrea), an authoritarian state in civil war (Syria) and an authoritarian state in democratic transition (Iraq). In order to determine the level of democracy in a country, I employ two sources: the Polity IV score by Our World In Data (Roser, 2019), containing data of 2015 (a twenty-point scale, ranging from -10: full autocracy

¹ Initially a fifth group of Chinese migrants was included in the study. China was classified as an authoritarian country. However it proved too difficult to gather a sufficient number of participants from this group. According to community-members, people are generally hesitant to discuss political themes within the Chinese community.

to 10: full democracy) and the Democracy Index by the Economist Intelligent Unit, containing data of 2019 (a ten-point scale, ranging from 0: authoritarian regime to 10: democratic regime). Table 2 reflects the democracy-scores employed in this study.

Table 2: democracy scores

COUNTRY	POLITY IV SCORE	POLITY IV STATUS	DEMOCRACY INDEX SCORE	DEMOCRACY INDEX STATUS
GHANA	+8	Democracy	6.63	Flawed democracy
ERITREA	-7	Autocracy	2.37	Authoritarian
SYRIA	-9	Autocracy	1.43	Authoritarian
IRAQ	+6	Democracy	3.74	Authoritarian

Ghana is the only democracy included in the analysis. The country also classifies as a Christian country, with over 70% percent of its population adhering to Christianity (CIA World Factbook, 2019). Furthermore, the Church functions as a very influential institution in society (Yirenkyi. 2000).

Eritrea is a clear authoritarian state, characterized by an autocratic government strongly controlling political and public life. Pew Research Center (2010) estimates that Christians compose 62.9% of the population. Although formerly known as a beacon of religious tolerance, many Christian minority denominations have fallen victim to state persecution in recent years, despite the state’s formal acceptance of several forms of Christianity (Mekonnen & van Reisen, 2013).

Syria is likewise a non-democratic state, which has also been disrupted by a continuing civil war. Christians form a minority group, of approximately 16% (MEPOS, 2017). Before the civil war, Christians’ security was relatively solid, with relatively strong socioeconomic prosperity and structural protection by the government, which mainly consists of Islamic-minority group members (Farha & Mousa, 2015).

Iraq forms a special case among the selection. The country shows a trend towards democratization in recent years. However, during the period most Christians emigrated from the country, Iraq still ranked as an autocracy and will therefore be classed as such in this study. Christians form a very small minority among the population, estimated to only compose 1% of the current population (CIA World Factbook, 2020). However the percentage of Christians among Iraq-born migrants in Western countries is much higher, ranging as high as 45% (Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing, 2016).

This selection of countries enables me to gain insight in the mindset of migrants from Middle-Eastern and African countries. I expect that it is possible to extrapolate the results from this selection to other countries in these two regions, as both the religious and cultural circumstances in those countries are comparable to those of the countries in this selection. Furthermore, these are two regions out of which many of the current migrants in the Netherlands have emigrated.

I have interviewed a total number of 37 people from the four groups. I have targeted to question people aged between 16 and 35, with three exceptions rising above that age-limit. All of the respondents currently live in the Netherlands, or have only moved outside of the Netherlands within the last three years. In terms of church denomination, people belong to Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox communities. Many respondents however simply labeled themselves as Christians, and did not attach much value to specific church-denominations.

Results and analysis

Understanding of democracy

Questions in the interviews were directed at people’s definition and appreciation of the democratic system. Table 3 reflects the labels attached to each respondent’s interpretation of de democracy.

Table 3: respondent’s interpretations of democracy

	LIBERAL	DELIBERATIVE	THEOCRATIC	PROCEDURA L	LIBERAL/THEOCRATIC
IRAQ	6	-	-	1	2
SYRIA	4	1	1	-	1
ERITREA	9	2	-	-	1
GHANA	8	1	-	-	-

A first striking conclusion that can be derived from the results is that almost none of the respondents define democracy in purely procedural terms. In all cases but one, respondents attach a set of constitutional rights and freedoms to their minimal description of democracy. At most, respondents initially described democracy in procedural terms when asked directly, and later added further elements to their definition in a less explicit manner. Only one respondent, from the Iraqi group, offered a procedural description of democracy, limiting his understanding of democracy to the mechanisms of elections and majority rule, as becomes clear from the following quote:

IM8: *To me democracy means that the people can rule the country. They can influence the country by voting, for instance.*

Furthermore, respondent IM8 indicated that he did not have strong feelings about democracy in general. On a number of subjects he expressed not to have any particular opinion, and that he found it difficult to provide any specific answer to the question. He did however add to his responses that he regarded democracy as a superior system compared to other political systems, because of the relative power people possess in controlling their government.

A second clear conclusion that can be derived from the data is that respondents’ loyalty to their religious faith strongly outgrows their loyalty towards democratic citizenship. All respondents, without exception, stated that they would prioritize their religion in case it would fundamentally clash with the democratic outcome. Explanations often offered for these positions stated that religion was close to their heart and contained elements of eternal truth for them personally. However, many respondents declared they found it difficult to imagine any scenario in which democracy and their faith would collide. Others stated that they could only imagine a confrontation between the two in case freedom of religion would be limited. A number of respondents indicated that they would not consider a state which undertakes such actions as a democracy in the first place, therefore resolving this theoretical conflict.

Authoritarian origin

To test hypothesis one, I investigated whether respondents out of the three migrant groups from authoritarian countries primarily attach a theocratic description to their definition of democracy. However, this did not prove to be the case. The majority of respondents defined democracy in liberal terms, often mixed with deliberative aspects. Three elements compose the core of their general arguments: freedom, popular sovereignty and the civic opportunity to vote. The concept of freedom was highly appreciated by respondents. Foremost freedom of expression and freedom of religion were mentioned as predominant features of the democratic system that elevate it above other political systems. Not only did a number of respondents present freedom as a crucial aspect of democracy, but some even equated the concept of democracy itself to that of freedom. This opinion was for example expressed by respondent SM5, from the Syrian group, who stated:

SM5: Democracy means that it is a country where you can express your opinion in freedom. Whether that opinion is respected is a different matter, but the most important element it contains is that you can express your opinion.

This emphasis on freedom forms the foundation for respondents' liberal and deliberative methods of defining democracy. However, the notion of freedom was generally not presented as a shallow concept. For the majority of respondents democratic freedom includes that people may live their lives as they see fit, even if they personally do not agree with the life choices of others. 'Live and let live' was a frequently expressed phrase to articulate this sentiment. However, many respondents emphasized that this freedom should work both ways, and that people should also maintain the freedom to be in opposition to certain activities of other people, as was expressed by respondent EM12:

EM12: Democracy is a broad concept. Religion is as well. Sometimes it is very difficult to unite the two. It would be ideal if you clarify the separation between the two. For example, in some Islamic and Christian communities gay rights are not accepted. But in a democracy it is allowed. You then have to say: 'in a democracy you can be who you want to be.' But you shouldn't force those democratic convictions upon the religious communities. I believe that people follow a certain religion because they are convinced by the rules of that religion. So the church shouldn't always have to agree with the values of the democratic outcome, but they shouldn't combat them as well. So people just have to have rights, and the church has to have the possibility to do her own thing.

In line with the notion of individual freedom, many respondents stressed the importance of freedom for the people as a whole to self-determine their fate and select their own government. Respondent EM11 phrased it as follows:

EM11: I think democracy is a way of life in which the people decide what has to happen. And that society decides on the basis of that will, how policy is executed, how one is governed and by whom one is governed.

Most respondents confirmed that in their opinion free elections compose the mechanism through which that government should be appointed. Many asserted that by choosing political representatives through elections, the people can ensure that their interests will be on the agenda within the political domain. A close connection between politician and his constituents was generally regarded as major benefit of democracy, by which citizens have the capacity to make their voices known publicly. The group of liberal interpreters also valued their ability to evaluate the performances of their representatives, and to judge on the basis of that evaluation in the following election-process. Still, some respondents expressed that the mechanism of representative democracy falls short of truly representing the democratic will of the people, as was articulated by respondent IF5:

IF5: *The government takes input from the people into account in their representation. Basically, we elect our representatives, and this generates indirect influence on our society. On our government policies. In that sense, we are indirectly democratic. Well, actually democratic, but I think it is only indirectly democratic.*

Respondents were also less unified in their satisfaction with the system of political representation. While some affirmed that they had confidence in political representatives, others claimed that the representative mechanism rendered political power by citizens too limited.

EF3: *In a democracy citizens elect those who are going to govern the country. And in which they also have... well, some slight influence on their laws and regulations. Sometimes they organize a referendum or whatever, in which you can vote. But in general it are the political leaders who decide on the big issues. But, well, we got some sort of influence once in a while through elections.*

Regarding the role of citizens in a democracy, a range of opportunities and responsibilities was regularly mentioned: voting, making one's own voice and interests known publicly, informing oneself politically and following the news, commanding representatives to account for their political decisions and protesting in public in case the democratic process threatens to clash with people's fundamental convictions and interests. However, most respondents presented these democratic activities primarily as opportunities, without specifically attaching far-reaching responsibilities to them. Although many respondents labelled as liberal interpreters mixed their liberal definition of democracy with deliberative elements in their responses, they did not present an integral deliberative understanding of democracy. Those respondents that did present these activities as responsibilities rather than opportunities were labelled as deliberative interpreters of democracy. They stressed that not only do citizens have the freedom to interfere with political affairs, but they rather have the duty to contribute to the common good. Respondent EM9 was one out of two Eritrean respondents whose interpretation of democracy was labelled as deliberative. He explained the democratic role of citizens as follows:

EM9: *We have rights and duties, and we have to know them. We must respect all others. We have to understand that the rights that we possess are also in the hands of other who don't agree with us. And then, we also have to participate in the system. Also in other activities than voting alone. Because in a democracy you have freedom, and if you don't agree with something, you have to try and change it. You have to participate, also in politics. Also in a party. You have to follow the news and follow politics, because that is all part of democracy.*

Only one respondent, out of the Syrian group (SM4), presented a clear theocratic interpretation of democracy. He explicitly stated that democracy can spin out of control in its tendency to grant liberal freedoms to people and that democracy can 'go too far', beyond what is morally acceptable. He concentrated on the issues of sexual freedom and gay marriage in order to clarify his position. In his view the democratic process should be limited in its possible outcomes:

SM4: *If you ask me, democracy here in the Netherlands is a bit too much... Mainly in the Western world, it's all a bit too much. The freedom of the people in a democracy reaches too far. On the one hand it is important that you have the freedom to express your opinion, but you should not go all out crazy on that freedom. There are limits. As Christians, we cannot marry man to man, and all that. Or female with female. Unfortunately here in the Netherlands, everything is allowed. There should be certain limits. I'd rather see that this would not be allowed, because for us Christians, this is prohibited. It is against our faith.*

Three other respondents were classified as hybrids between liberal and theocratic interpreters. While they were staunch supporters of religious and liberal freedom, they simultaneously asserted that some of those freedoms had gone beyond what is acceptable. They did not explicitly state that certain activities of others should be prohibited, but did express their concerns about the current state of liberal democracy. One respondent concentrated on the freedom of Muslims in Western democracy. Although she states that Muslims can enjoy freedom similar to other people in democracy, she simultaneously placed limits on that freedom.

EF2: I don't say it because I am Christian, but the Netherlands historically is a Christian country. Now there is democracy, they allow many mosques to be build here. Then we lose the culture and history of this country. They have to find balance between Dutch culture and democracy, and they have to preserve history. I see many mosques in my hometown. That does not belong to the Netherlands. Everyone may believe in his own religion. That is perfectly possible. Everyone is free. Everyone's faith is respected. But you cannot try to change culture with your beliefs or try to influence others through your religion.

Despite the many similarities between the three different migrant groups, there is a distinction to be recognized as well. There is a noticeable divide between Iraqi migrants on the one hand and Eritrean and Syrian migrants on the other hand, mainly caused by their view of religion and its place in democracy. Whereas the majority of Iraqi migrants asserts that there must be a clear separation between church and state, Eritreans and Syrians seem to be equally divided on this issue. Among the Iraqis, many respondents specified that religion should not play any significant role in democracy, that religious leaders should not seek any political influence and stressed that religious groups should be unrestrained in the practice of their faith, as expressed by respondent IF1:

IF1: Religious leaders should not at all interfere in politics. Religion should not have any influence on politics. Because the church is just the church, and politics is politics. And those two should not be mixed. Unfortunately it happens, and you can see that those churches decline. Many bishops and priests have attached themselves to politics, and I just don't like that. It should not have been that way.

About half of the Syrian and Eritrean groups cherish the same sentiment. However, those who are in favor of a role for religion in democracy name multiple benefits: they applaud the fact that the Netherlands gives room to a number of Christian political parties, state that religion can teach values to citizens, that these values can consequently shape society, and express that faith can function as an important source for political inspiration. Respondent SF1 articulates this position:

SF1: I think that religious political parties should be allowed in democracy. Because I think that you can take good motivations from your religion to deliver good policies for all people. Even if it is an Islamic party or a Buddhistic party, they can introduce ideas into politics that are in the interest of all people.

Two things are remarkable about these results. The first is that the Iraqi group seems most vocal in their support for separation between church and state, while some of these same respondents showed elements of a theocratic interpretation of democracy in their responses. Secondly, it could very well be that a different factor than country of origin influences people's position on this issue. A closer look at the data reveals that most Protestant Christians do see a role for faith in politics, while a large portion of Orthodox Christians does not. Church denomination could therefore be the real indicator for these differences in opinion.

In general, the data provide enough reason to reject hypothesis 1. The majority of respondents interpret democracy in liberal terms and are loyal to liberal principles such as freedom of expression and freedom of religion. Furthermore, although respondents differ in their assessment of the relationship between church and state, almost none of the respondents claim that democracy should be limited by their own religious values.

Democratic origin

Hypothesis 2 however is confirmed by the data. Looking at the Ghanaian group, the majority of respondents interprets democracy in liberal terms, often mixed with deliberative elements. Like the migrants from authoritarian countries, they emphasize the importance of liberal freedoms in a democracy, and their duty to grant this freedom to people of different opinions as well.

GF4: Democracy means that I can express my free will against another. And the other can accept me, just as I am. And sometimes it is even the case that the government can implement that will. A democracy has regulations, but still, we have the freedom to maintain our own influence.

Furthermore, just like the majority of respondents in the other migrant groups, the Ghanaian respondents generally point to high levels of information, political accountability and the freedom to protest as positive aspects of democracy, and as incentives for citizens to actively engage themselves with the political process. However, only one of the respondents designated these activities as civic responsibilities, and was therefore labelled as a deliberative interpreter of democracy.

GM6: The most important role of the citizen is to participate in society. To obey the rules. But you also have to vote. And when you vote, you have to know for which party you vote. You have to know what they stand for, what they express. So therefore you have to inform yourself.

Universal implementation

Table 4: respondent’s opinion on the superiority and universal applicability of democracy

	SUPERIOR AND UNIVERSAL IMPLEMENTATION	SUPERIOR, NO UNIVERSAL IMPLEMENTATION	NOT SUPERIOR, NO UNIVERSAL IMPLEMENTATION	OTHER²
IRAQ	5	-	2	2
SYRIA	2	3	1	1
ERITRE A	6	3	2	1
GHANA	7	1	1	-

Respondents were divided on the issue of universal implementation of democracy. Three different groups were classified: those who regarded democracy as a superior system and were in favor of universal implementation, those who regarded it as superior but were not in favor of universal

² This group of respondents did not respond to question 3 of the questionnaire by stating any opinion on the supposed superiority of democracy, but replied in a different manner.

implementation and those who did not regard democracy as a superior system at all. While the majority of respondents holds that democracy is superior to other political systems and that it is desirable to implement democracy universally, a significant portion claims that democracy cannot be implemented in every country. Furthermore, it seems that within the Ghanaian group less people doubt the universal applicability of democracy than in the other three groups. This verifies hypothesis 3.

The largest group of respondents claimed that democracy was both superior to other systems and that it would be a positive development when democracy would be implemented worldwide. The main reason for this position among respondents is that to them democracy is the most favorable political system because it donates political power to citizens. Two concepts became apparent as central to their line of reasoning: equality and rights. People classified within this group regard democracy as a fair system, in which every citizen has an opportunity to influence the state.

EF6: What is good about democracy, is that everyone's voice can be heard. Everyone can provide his opinion. In a dictatorship, that is not possible.

A second argument made in favor of universal implementation is that citizens have to right to access democracy, even in countries where the democratic system may not work perfectly. Respondents that held this position maintained that citizens cannot be alienated from their freedom to act politically.

EF5: In practice, some countries are not prepared enough to implement democracy. So it is easy to say: 'that dictatorship has to become a democracy', when the circumstances in that country are not beneficial. But I would not argue that those circumstances have to be created first, before you can implement democracy. Because everyone has the right to live in a democratic country.

However, quite a few respondents who did regard democracy as a superior system, did not think that democracy can sufficiently function in every country. A few arguments to this effect became apparent in their responses. Firstly, a few respondents posited that not every culture is compatible with the democratic mechanism. Some nations, this argument outlines, fare better by a strong leader than by an egalitarian system with high levels of citizen power in the political domain.

GF3: I think that in Ghana democracy does not work. They often have to recheck election results for example. That's why I don't really see it as a democracy, although that is what it is called. I think that democracy perhaps doesn't work, but a dictatorship would go too far. So a hybrid would probably be the best. Or actually, there should be an institution which properly scrutinizes government actions.

A second reason offered is that in some countries not enough people understand the concepts of freedom and democracy, and that they are therefore not ready to live within the democratic system.

SM7: Many people in Syria do not understand freedom. They do not even understand democracy. That is why you need a strong leader sometimes; at least he can correct the misbehaviors of the people and bring some order in society. Only when people understand those concepts, democracy can properly operate.

The third reason resembles the previous one. Here respondents argue that the level of education is not high enough in many countries to implement democracy. They maintain that first this level of education has to be raised before people can grow into democracy. In essence, this is an argument to first establish a democratization-process before democracy itself can be established.

IM6: *I think that you can't implement democracy everywhere, simply because there are many countries, especially in the Middle-East, who lack behind in all sorts: in infrastructure, in intelligence, in their way of life; you know, many let their lives be dictated by their religion. Look for example at Iraq; they have tried to implement democracy over there, and it has gone wrong. That is because you have all kinds of minorities who try to combat each other, because they cannot enter into conversation with one another. That's why you get bombings and all that. That's why I think it is too early now to implement democracy over there. But you do see a trend towards higher intelligence. That is a good development. But they lack so far behind, it is going to take years before they catch up with the west.*

A third group, although small in this study, denies the superiority of democracy altogether. Their arguments resemble those of the previous group, but in addition these respondents don't see a necessity for countries to evolve towards democratization. Instead they maintain that different nations need different political systems, and that there is nothing intrinsically troublesome about that.

EF3: *To be honest, I think a combination of democracy and authoritarianism would be good. I don't think it is necessarily bad when a leader possesses a large share of power, as long as he allows influence from the people. I don't mean a dictator, that would go too far. But I would be content with, for example, a president, who allows his people some influence through elections on certain issues. I don't think it is necessary to have multiple parties, or coalitions, or debates every time or whatever.*

One respondent even specifically stated that democracy is a system of the Western world and that it is not necessarily beneficial to other regions.

IM9: *For me, democracy is primarily a system of the Western world. In my opinion a different system than democracy, for example what people call a dictatorship, can be the right system as well, when implemented in the right place. You have to look at which system fits which state.*

I wouldn't mind it if Iraq stays the way it always was. It doesn't necessarily have to become a democracy for my part. If it were to stay a dictatorship, that would be fine with me. Furthermore, that's how they present it: 'a dictatorship'. But in effect it is basically a presidential system, just like in America.

It is notable that within the Ghanaian group a large majority of respondents regards democracy as a superior system that should be implemented globally. Seven out of nine respondents declared that democracy is the best system in the world, whereas in other groups this number of respondents at most amounted up to about half of the respondent-set. From the data in this study a few differences can be aggregated in this respect. More Ghanaian respondents emphasized the level of political access, political equality and individual freedom in a democracy as elements which elevate it above other systems.

Migrants from authoritarian countries on the other hand more often specified that it is sometimes necessary for the leader in a country to force his will upon the people in order to safeguard the collective interest. They for instance stressed that a strong leader can maintain order in the nation and prevent rebellion and chaos among the people. It also became clear from the data that migrants from authoritarian states are more wary of their countrymen in the country of origin. They noticeably do not trust other groups in their home country to be loyal citizens and frequently prefer the rule of a dictator above the implementation of democracy if that entails that radical religious groups in the home country could take control of the democratic apparatus.

Conclusion and discussion

This study sought to investigate two central themes: the defining of democracy by Christian migrants, and their appreciation of democracy in comparison to other political systems. The results indicate that Christian migrants in the Netherlands maintain a primarily positive perception of democracy. Regarding the first theme a few conclusions have become apparent. The majority of respondents defined democracy through liberal and deliberative concepts. Individual freedom, religious freedom, self-determination by the people and a civic share in governmental power were revealed to be the most appreciated aspects of democracy by respondents. Furthermore, structural communication between politicians and citizens and high levels of information and democratic education were frequently mentioned as crucial elements of stable democracy. A small minority of respondents interpreted democracy through a (partly) theocratic lens. Noteworthy is that these theocratic sentiments mainly focus on the issue of sexual ethics, in particular on the acceptance of homosexuality and gay marriage.

In case of the second subject respondents were more divided. Though the vast majority of respondents regarded democracy as a superior system compared to other political systems, a smaller majority expressed their support for universal implementation, and a substantial group rejected the idea of universal implementation altogether. The results show that the Ghanaian group is most uniform in its support for universal implementation. Influence by the people on the government and the right to access the political domain are two of the most important reasons for people to support universal implementation of democracy. Those who are in opposition to universal implementation point to differences in cultural applicability and levels of education among the people.

A few limitations of this study have to be mentioned. Firstly, I could not account for level of education, socioeconomic status and religious majority/minority-status in the selection of the research population, partly because the different groups included in the case selection score vastly different on almost all of these indicators on a collective level. Another difference within the research population for which I could not account affects those migrants that have migrated decades ago and those who have moved to the Netherlands in recent times. The Iraqi community for example, largely moved to the Netherlands during the reign of Saddam Hussein or during the period of his downfall. In contrast, a significant portion of the Eritrean community has moved to the Netherlands in the last 15 years. Although earlier studies indicate that the amount of time spent in a Western democracy does not heavily influence people's perceptions of democracy (Bilodeau, McAllister & Kanji, 2010), it is difficult to account for this while comparing groups that have migrated in different periods, and consequently have spent more or less time in their democratic country of residence. The study has however given no indication that the amount of time spent in the democratic host country heavily influences respondents' openness to non-democratic systems, and therefore forms no obstacle for the findings in this study.

A concern prior to the research was that the mechanism of value-transmission within the family between first- and second-generation migrants would prove not to be applicable, and that significant differences between first- and second-generation migrants would blur the results of this study. However, it does not seem that this fear did materialize. Although all second-generation migrants interpret democracy in primarily liberal terms, this counts for the vast majority of respondents. On the issue of universal implementation, no significant differences were found between first- and second-generation migrants, as can be checked in table 5 in the appendix.

From the material one can derive another factor that may influence interpretation of democracy: church denomination. Regarding the relationship people theorize between religion and democracy, people belonging to Protestant denominations more often explicitly supported an active role for religious faith and leadership in the democratic society. People from Orthodox denominations were more ambiguous in their expressions. On the one hand they were often outspokenly in favor of a clear separation between church and state, but on the other hand they regularly stated that democracy should not cross particular moral boundaries, often based on their personal religious values, especially regarding the issues of sex and marriage. This also signifies the different interpretations people provided on the issue of liberal rights. Respondents from Protestant churches more often stated that people should have maximal democratic freedom, but should not be forced to personally support and promote the lifestyles of others with whom they fall in disagreement. People from Orthodox churches more often stated that the democracy should not promote the freedom to engage in certain activities contrary to their own value-system, even when they held that people should be granted the judicial freedom to undertake that lifestyle in a democracy. In essence, people from different denominations seem to differ in their emphasis on a more liberal or theocratic interpretation of democracy. Further and deepened research on the different views that are maintained in different denominations may further clarify differences in understanding of democracy.

A final factor which may have influenced the results of this study is the choice of religion as a control variable. Although previous research points out that religion is no significant indicator for support of democracy, studies do also show that Muslims are often more conservative on a range of social values compared to Christian and secular European natives (Diehl, Koenig & Ruckdeschel, 2009). Furthermore, a study in the Arab world shows that support for democracy does not highly correlate with support of liberal values such as gender-equality (Kostenko, Kuzmichev & Ponarin, 2016), while in the Western world gender-equality is regarded as a fundamental component of a democratic system. It could therefore be that because of the lack of overlap between the faith of Muslim immigrants and the religious history in European host countries, religion does have an effect on definitions and interpretations of democracy, and consequently generates different outcomes compared to a study on Christian migrants, who do share a common religious background with religious European natives. Research among migrants of Islamic faith could further clarify the relationship between country of origin and definition of democracy.

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Appendix:

Questionnaire

1. How do you define democracy?
2. What are alternative systems to democracy?
3. How do you value democracy compared to the other political systems you mentioned?
4. What is your role as a citizen in a democracy?
5. Are there any fundamental values which may not be harmed by the democratic process?
6. What is the role of religious principles in a democracy?
7. What is the role of the Church in a democracy?
8. What is the role of church leadership in a democracy?
9. Which values would you prioritize if your religious beliefs and democratic principles collide?

Table 5: respondent statistics

<i>Name</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Religious Denomination</i>	<i>Date of Interview</i>	<i>Interpretation of democracy</i>	<i>Superiority of implementation</i>
<i>IF1</i>	Iraq	Female	29	Syrian-Orthodox	28/04/2020	Liberal/Theocratic	Other
<i>IF2</i>	Iraq	Female	24	Roman-Catholic	29/04/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>IF3</i>	Iraq	Female	19	Christianity	30/04/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>IF4</i>	Iraq	Female	19	Christianity	30/04/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>IF5</i>	Iraq	Female	29	Syrian-Orthodox	11/05/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>IM6</i>	Iraq	Male	27	Syrian-Orthodox	02/05/2020	Liberal	Not superior
<i>IM7</i>	Iraq	Male	26	Syrian-Orthodox	04/05/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>IM8</i>	Iraq	Male	28	Syrian-Orthodox	11/05/2020	Procedural	Superior
<i>IM9</i>	Iraq	Male	32	Christianity	15/05/2020	Liberal/Theocratic	Not Superior
<i>SF1</i>	Syria	Female	27	Protestant	07/05/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>SF2</i>	Syria	Female	23	Protestant	12/05/2020	Liberal/Theocratic	Superior
<i>SF3</i>	Syria	Female	19	Syrian-Orthodox	17/06/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>SM4</i>	Syria	Male	36	Syrian-Orthodox	25/05/2020	Theocratic	Not Superior
<i>SM5</i>	Syria	Male	29	Christianity	05/06/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>SM6</i>	Syria	Male	19	Protestant	09/06/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>SM7</i>	Syria	Male	34	Syrian-Orthodox	19/06/2020	Deliberative	Superior
<i>EF1</i>	Eritrea	Female	34	Christianity	13/05/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>EF2</i>	Eritrea	Female	42	Christianity	15/05/2020	Liberal/Theocratic	Superior
<i>EF3</i>	Eritrea	Female	25	Protestant	19/05/2020	Liberal	Not Superior
<i>EF4</i>	Eritrea	Female	26	Protestant	20/05/2020	Liberal	Superior

<i>EF5</i>	Eritrea	Female	24	Roman-Catholic	23/05/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>EF6</i>	Eritrea	Female	26	Protestant	28/05/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>EF7</i>	Eritrea	Female	23	Christianity	31/05/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>EM8</i>	Eritrea	Male	26	Protestant	13/05/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>EM9</i>	Eritrea	Male	35	Protestant	14/05/2020	Deliberative	Superior
<i>EM10</i>	Eritrea	Male	20	Protestant	20/05/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>EM11</i>	Eritrea	Male	23	Protestant	21/05/2020	Liberal	Not superior
<i>EM12</i>	Eritrea	Male	22	Christianity	27/05/2020	Deliberative	Superior
<i>GF1</i>	Ghana	Female	21	Protestant	24/05/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>GF2</i>	Ghana	Female	27	Protestant	28/05/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>GF3</i>	Ghana	Female	26	Christianity	29/05/2020	Liberal	Not superior
<i>GF4</i>	Ghana	Female	22	Protestant	05/06/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>GF5</i>	Ghana	Female	27	Protestant	19/06/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>GM6</i>	Ghana	Male	40	Protestant	18/05/2020	Deliberative	Superior
<i>GM7</i>	Ghana	Male	23	Protestant	21/05/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>GM8</i>	Ghana	Male	26	Christianity	05/06/2020	Liberal	Superior
<i>GM9</i>	Ghana	Male	33	Protestant	12/06/2020	Liberal	Superior

Total number of respondents: 37