

Themes of Democracy in Everyday Knowledge

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine how citizens in Türkiye conceptualize democracy. The study was conducted with participants living in Istanbul, a highly heterogeneous city that is thought to represent Türkiye well. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 participants using questions on democracy developed by the researcher and thesis advisor based on the literature and finalized through pilot interviews. These interviews were conducted both individually and in the form of focus group interviews. The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative analysis method. Accordingly, 789 codes were obtained; 33 sub-themes and 11 themes were extracted from these codes. These themes are: “Democracy that is impossible,” “Democracy that depends on preconditions,” “Democracy that is a better system than its alternatives,” “Democracy with disadvantages,” “Democracy defined by liberal values,” “Democracy defined by economic and social benefits,” “Democracy defined by institutions and procedures,” “Responsibility of democracy,” “Restricted democracy,” “Democracy evaluated in a universal/cultural dimension,” “Democracy without compromise, These themes indicate that democracy is conceptualized through diverse and comprehensive dimensions. At the same time, findings that can be considered specific to this study reveal the effects of the social, cultural, and political context in which the participants live, and their past and current democratic experiences have been obtained. These findings support the idea that democracy is a social structure whose meanings and forms change according to social and cultural differences.

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Gündelik Bilgide Demokrasi Temaları

Öz

Bu çalışma, Türkiye’deki vatandaşların demokrasiyi nasıl kavramsallaştırdığını incelemeyi amaçlamıştır. Çalışma, oldukça heterojen bir il olarak Türkiye’yi iyi temsil edeceği düşünüldüğünden, İstanbul’da yaşayan katılımcılarla yürütülmüştür. Alan yazın temelinde, araştırmacı ve tez danışmanı tarafından hazırlanan ve pilot görüşmelerle nihai halini alan demokrasiye ilişkin sorularla toplam 30 katılımcıyla yarı yapılandırılmış, derinlemesine görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu görüşmeler hem bireysel hem de odak grup görüşmeleri şeklinde yapılmıştır. Görüşmelerden elde edilen veriler, nitel bir analiz yöntemi olan tematik analiz yöntemiyle analiz edilmiştir. Buna göre, 789 kod elde edilmiş olup; 33 alt tema ve 11 tema çıkartılmıştır. Bu temalar şunlardır: ‘Mümkün Olmayan Demokrasi’, ‘Önkoşullara Bağlı Demokrasi’, ‘Alternatiflerinden Daha İyi Bir Sistem Olan Demokrasi’, ‘Dezavantajlı Demokrasi’, ‘Liberal Değerlerle Tanımlanan Demokrasi’, ‘Ekonomik ve Sosyal Faydalarla Tanımlanan Demokrasi’, ‘Kurumlar ve Prosedürlerle Tanımlanan Demokrasi’, ‘Demokrasinin Sorumluluğu’, ‘Sınırlanan Demokrasi’, ‘Evrensel/Kültürel Boyutta Değerlendirilen Demokrasi’, ‘Taviz Verilmeyen Demokrasi’. Bu tema ve alt temalar bir bütün olarak değerlendirildiğinde, demokrasinin oldukça çeşitli ve kapsamlı boyutlar üzerinden kavramsallaştırıldığı görülmüştür. Aynı zamanda, bu çalışmaya özgü olarak değerlendirilebilecek olan; katılımcıların içinde yaşadıkları sosyal, kültürel ve politik bağlam ile geçmiş ve mevcut demokrasi deneyimlerinin etkilerini de ortaya koyan bulgular elde edilmiştir. Bu bulgular, demokrasinin toplumsal ve kültürel farklılıklara göre anlamları ve biçimleri değişen bir sosyal yapı olduğu düşüncesine destek sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Demokrasi; Sıradan kişi; Gündelik bilgi; Kavramsallaştırma; Tematik analiz.

Introduction

The Greeks were the first to use the term “democracy” in the sense of “government of the people” (Harrison, 1993). For them, this marked the emergence of a democratic period, with the conflation of demos (the people) and kratos (world growth). In Athens, demos usually meant all Athenians, some-

times ordinary people, and sometimes only to the lower socioeconomic classes. In any case, they used the term “demokratia” to refer to the system of government of Athens and other Greek city-states (Dahl, 2001).

Although many researchers in the literature emphasize that democracy emerged in ancient Greece more than two thousand years ago (e.g., Jones, 1953; Sen, 1999), it is difficult to claim that democracy is exclusively a Greek political invention. Archaeological research shows that the first examples of democracy emerged in regions now known as Syria, Iran, and Iraq, and from there, spread eastward to the Indian Peninsula and westward to the Phoenician cities and Athens (Keane, 2022).

However, it is difficult to see this democracy in ancient times as democracy in the modern sense because it took a long time for modern democracy to develop and take its current form. As Dahl (2001) notes, "Democracy in the modern sense may not be exactly young, but it is difficult to say that it is ancient either" (p. 10). The emergence of modern democracy as a functioning system of government was shaped by various historical developments, from the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 to the French and American revolutions in the 18th century and the expansion of the right to vote in Europe and North America in the 19th century. By the 20th century, democracy was accepted as a standard form of government to which every nation had the right (Sen, 1999). However, it would be misleading to assume that democracy developed continuously from Ancient Greece to the present. Historically, democracy declined after its early development in Greece and Rome and largely disappeared (Dahl, 2001).

Today, democracy is widely accepted as a core political value and occupies a central place in the social sciences. However, despite its deep-rooted history and prevalence worldwide, there is still no clear consensus on what democracy means and which system it refers to (Andersen et al., 2018; Knutsen, 2011). According to one of the old definitions, democracy is usually addressed in its procedural aspect, that is, by focusing on processes. For example, Schumpeter (2010, p. 269) defines democracy as “the democratic method is the institutional arrangement for reaching political decisions in which individuals obtain decision-making power through a competitive struggle for the people's vote.” Similarly, Lipset (1986, p. 25) defines democracy as a political system that provides regular opportunities by the constitution to

change rulers and a social mechanism that allows a large segment of the population to influence essential decisions by choosing between those competing for political power. These emphasize specific institutional rules and procedures through which governments are legitimized by elections.

For some researchers, democracy means much more than processes and practices related to politics and governance. For example, Dewey (2000) argued that democracy is not only a political structure but also has moral content and defined it as a political process in which individuals' moral consciousness plays a role in making impartial, and non-discriminatory decisions (as cited in Glina, 2009). Sartori (1993), who took a similar approach to Dewey but focused on the ethics of responsibility that forms the basis of Weberian thought, aimed to combine the deontological acceptance of moral principles with the concepts of responsibility, consent, and accountability, which he regarded as essential elements of democracy. According to him, any action or decision should be evaluated within the framework of the ethics of responsibility; in other words, it should be based on a condition in which the other party can have a say.

As noted above, democracy has been defined in various ways by different theorists, and no single agreed-upon definition exists (Dahl, 1971; Moghaddam, 2018; Tilly, 2011). This difficulty in defining democracy in the literature brings other questions to mind. Does democracy have a universal content valid for everyone, or does it take different forms depending on cultural and social contexts? Scholars debate whether democracy has a universal quality or whether it reflects a predominantly Western cultural norm (Tan and Whalen-Bridge, 2008). For example, while some theorists such as Sartori (1993) argue that there is a single definition of democracy, others argue that the idea of democracy varies according to different societies and cultures (e.g., Dallmayr, 1997; Inglehart, 1990, 1997, 2000; Montiel and Wessells, 2001; Putnam, 1993). For example, Montiel and Wessells (2001) consider the idea that there is a single democracy that is valid for everyone as an overemphasis on Eurocentric modernity and argue that Western-centric democratic models may encounter limitations under specific sociocultural conditions. According to them, In societies influenced by strong Confucian traditions, more liberal discourses such as universalism, egalitarianism, and individual rights will be secondary to obligations and traditions. In such a context, only decisions made by the elders will have political legitimacy. Therefore, these theorists believe

that democracy is a social structure with different forms and meanings in different social and cultural contexts.

Based on these, it is necessary to reconsider and evaluate democracy according to cultural differences and diversity. One approach to addressing this issue is to examine how ordinary citizens conceptualize democracy. Studies show that democracy has different meanings among citizens and societies (e.g., Diamond and Plattner, 2008; Kaufman and Stadelmaier, 2020). This finding supports the idea that democracy is a social structure with meanings and forms that vary according to social and cultural differences. Therefore, understanding the perspectives of citizens in a society regarding democracy and the type of democracy they demand will provide a critical basis for other studies on the democratic structure and future of that society. It will also contribute to the validity of other studies in the literature, such as support for democracy, satisfaction with democracy, and attitudes towards democracy. Because the measurements used in these studies lead participants to evaluate democracy according to different criteria, making the findings unclear and controversial (Baviskar and Malone, 2004; Canache, 2012; Norris, 1999).

Citizens' perception of democracy and the extent to which they see democracy as an indispensable institution are also considered fundamental elements of political culture that will affect the functioning and institutionalization of democracy (Kemahlioğlu and Keyman, 2011). Many studies show that a political culture, which emphasizes self-expression, tolerance, trust, life satisfaction, and participatory orientations, plays a vital role in an effective democracy (Inglehart and Welzel, 2003; Kemahlioğlu and Keyman, 2011; Kuçuradi, 1998; Moghaddam, 2018). Inglehart and Welzel (2003) demonstrate that this connection is quite strong and continues even when a society's economic development level and the length of time it has experienced democratic institutions are controlled. Since the collapse of communism, democracy has had a positive image almost everywhere. However, these positive thoughts are often superficial, and the chances of an effective democracy at the societal level appear low unless it is accompanied by deep-rooted tolerance, trust, and participatory perspectives (Inglehart and Welzel, 2003).

From this point of view, the understanding of democracy will contribute to the studies that will reveal the expectations necessary for forming and disseminating political culture that affects the functioning and institutionalization of democracy. For all these reasons, this study aims to understand how citizens

in Türkiye conceptualize democracy and thereby contribute to the literature on democracy.

Everyday Conceptualizations of Democracy

A growing body of research examining how ordinary people conceptualize democracy shows that democracy is often defined broadly. People define democracy not only in terms of institutional structures and governance processes, such as political parties, voting, and civil rights, but also along a wide range of dimensions, including reduced poverty and crime, equal access to health and education, and the protection of rights and freedoms (Baviskar and Malone, 2004).

In many studies, liberal definitions are prominent, democracy is conceptualized in terms of rights and freedoms (e.g., Baviskar and Malone, 2004; Bratton and Mattes, 2001b; Dalton et al., 2007; Kemahlioğlu and Keyman, 2011; Moodie, 2005; Schedler and Sarsfield, 2007). For example, in a study conducted with Slovak and Scottish samples, democracy was primarily evaluated in terms of equality, freedom, and rights (Moodie, 2005). In another study conducted in Central and South American countries such as Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Guatemala, most participants defined democracy in terms of political rights and civil liberties (Baviskar and Malone, 2004). Liberal concepts have also been prominent in some studies conducted in Türkiye (e.g., Alacapınar, 2020; Kemahlioğlu and Keyman, 2011).

In addition to liberal conceptualizations, there are also many studies showing that economic and social benefits are at the forefront (e.g., Bratton and Mattes, 2001a; Canache, 2012; Şahin, 2016; Tessler et al., 2012). For example, in Arab countries such as Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan, it was found that dimensions of democracy such as economic equality and meeting basic needs were seen as more important than political dimensions such as fair elections or freedom of expression (Tessler et al., 2012). Another study conducted in several African countries showed that instead of liberal values, different economic and social components, such as equality in terms of work, education, and income, were at the forefront of definitions of democracy (Bratton and Mattes, 2001a).

Another important finding of these studies is that the diversity in people's conceptualizations of democracy is not limited to cultural differences but can also be explained by other factors. These factors include individuals' personal experiences (Bratton and Mattes, 2001a; Şahin, 2016; Tessler et al.,

2012), their gender, ethnic or religious identity, that is, their membership in a minority or dominant group, or their relationship with the state (Akboğa and Şahin, 2018).

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that the understanding of democracy of ordinary individuals is quite broad and diverse and that prominent conceptualizations differ between countries and citizens. Examining and evaluating this diversity will contribute to other studies to be conducted both in terms of democracy in general and the democratic system in that society.

Method

Research Model

This study examines how citizens in Türkiye conceptualize democracy. The research question was examined using a qualitative research design and thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative analytic approach and is "a method that identifies, analyzes, and reports themes within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

Ethical Procedures

This study was initiated after obtaining permission from the Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee of a university in Türkiye (Approval No: 215257; Date: 15.12.2020).

Participants

In this study, individuals' conceptualizations of democracy were obtained through semi-structured and in-depth interviews. In order to ensure demographic diversity, participants were selected from Istanbul, the most populous and sociodemographically heterogeneous city in Türkiye, which receives intense migration from different geographical regions. In other words, in order to ensure maximum diversity, the maximum diversity sampling method (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2013), which is one of the purposeful sampling methods that allows the inclusion of individuals with different characteristics in the study, was used. The interviews included a total of 30 participants, 5 focus groups of 3 people, and 15 one-on-one interviews. The relatively large number of participants was intended to ensure demographic and experiential diversity of participants. In studies where diversity of views is critical, as in this study, more participants are generally needed (Creswell, 2007). The participants included 20 males and 10 females, and their ages ranged from 18 to 48 ($M=30.27$, $SD=6.59$).

Data Collection Tools

Demographic Information Form

In this form, participants were requested to provide demographic information, including age, gender, education level, political view, ethnic origin, religious view, and occupation.

Semi-Structured Questionnaire on Democracy

The researcher and thesis advisor developed fifteen semi-structured questions based on the literature. Preliminary interviews with four participants were conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of these questions and revise them as needed based on the findings. Ultimately, the questions were refined for clarity and structured to encompass the essential dimensions of democracy. It contains 13 questions addressing participants' understandings of democracy, covering the following topics: "What kind of government do you think democracy is?", "What are the personality traits of citizens living in a democratic society?" "What can and should be done for democracy to function effectively?" "Are there different types of democracy?". Care was taken to ensure that these questions comprehensively covered various issues and dimensions of democracy.

Data Collection and Analysis

Various non-governmental organizations, universities, associations, and social media platforms were used to reach the study participants. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted online rather than face-to-face and were carried out online voluntarily using various applications. All interviews were conducted in quiet and appropriate settings for both the participants and the researcher. Before the interviews began, participants were provided with brief and precise introductory information about the study. Each participant was asked to complete a demographic information form and an informed consent form. With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded using a voice recorder. Individual interviews lasted approximately 35 minutes on average, while the focus group interviews took approximately one hour and 50 minutes.

The data were analyzed using the MAXQDA 2020 program and the thematic analysis method. The transcribed interviews were read twice by the researcher to familiarize themselves with the content. Then, open coding was applied by reading the data line by line in MAXQDA 2020 to identify meaningful codes. An inductive approach was used to create these codes, focusing

on meanings emerging from the data rather than what caught the researcher's attention.

The codes that shared commonalities were grouped and organized under various categories. These interrelated categories were then consolidated into broader themes. For instance, a code related to the "participation of disadvantaged groups in governance" was categorized under the theme of "pluralism" within the category of "democracy defined by institutions and procedures." After the themes were developed, the associated codes and the corresponding quotes were revisited to ensure they accurately represented the themes, performing a two-way check. Any codes deemed irrelevant or that did not correctly align with the theme were removed, finalizing the analysis. The researcher conducted the coding process and reviewed it with the thesis advisor to ensure impartiality and minimize potential bias. The following section will present the findings in detail, with examples from the quotes illustrating the themes and sub-themes. When quoting participants, their details will be provided in parentheses, including participant number, gender, age, education level, and ethnicity.

Findings

As a result of the thematic analysis, 789 codes were generated. Similar codes were grouped together, and 33 sub-themes were created. These sub-themes were further organized into 11 overarching themes. Table 1 presents these theme and sub-theme titles. When these themes and subthemes are evaluated as a whole, participants generally perceived democracy as beneficial for individuals and societies and as the most preferred system compared to other systems, they also emphasized some disadvantages. On the other hand, participants also suggested that these disadvantages could be prevented by providing certain preconditions or by limiting the contents or procedures of democracy when necessary. The comparison pattern and the resulting contrast between the ideal and fundamental practices of democracy, which organized the speech of almost all participants, indicates a perceived problem regarding the implementation of democracy. In other words, the determining effect of current bad practices in conceptualizing democracy comes to the fore. These themes are explained in detail in the following sections.

Tablo 1. Themes and Sub-themes Related to Democracy

Themes	Sub-themes
The Impossible Democracy	- Democracy as a Utopian System - The Non-Ideal Conditions of Today - Reasons Originating from Human Nature
Democracy with Preconditions	- Education is a Must - Economic Prosperity - Social Characteristics
Democracy as a Better System than the Alternatives	- Due to Its Advantages - Due to Its Sustainability - Provided It is Well Implemented - Despite Its Disadvantages
Disadvantaged Democracy	- Disadvantage of Majority Representation - Low Education Level - Abused Democracy - Democracy as a System Different in Practice and Theory
Democracy Defined by Liberal Values	- Equality - Civil Rights - Personal Freedoms - Justice - Individualism
Democracy Defined by Economic and Social Benefits	- Egalitarian Welfare Distribution - Sociality/Communality
Democracy Defined by Institutions and Procedure	- Self-Government of the People - Pluralism - Well-Functioning Democratic Institutions
Responsibility of Democracy	- Individual - Social - Interpersonal - State
Limiting Democracy	- Disadvantage of Unlimited Democracy - Limitation Subject to Certain Conditions - Special Situations
Democracy on a Universal/Cultural Dimension	- Universal Democracy - Culture-Specific Democracy
Democracy Without Compromise	

The Impossible Democracy

In this theme, democracy is conceptualized as an unattainable system because it is perceived as incompatible with the realities of contemporary societies and human nature. Such a perspective is sometimes expressed as democracy being a utopian phenomenon. Because these perceived limitations are considered difficult or impossible to resolve, democracy is viewed as a

system that cannot be fully realized. This situation was expressed by a participant as follows:

When I say democracy, it seems like a utopian system to me. Democracy can never be entirely created if we think of it worldwide, and it cannot be valid for everyone (Participant 16, Female, 25, Bachelor's Degree, Socialist, Circassian).

Another participant, who stated that the ideal conditions required for democracy to be implemented are not possible because they do not exist today, explained this situation as follows:

I agree that everything should be able to discuss, talk, and come out in the ideal. However, since there are no ideal conditions, the ideal is impossible today (Participant 26, Male, 36, Undergraduate, Liberal, Turkish).

Participants also argued that some unchangeable characteristics inherent to humans, often referred to as human nature by participants, make democracy an impossible system. In other words, democracy, which is for humans and about humans, is a system that cannot be created precisely because of humans themselves. For example, a participant expressed this situation as follows:

I mean, psychology in society can be directed very quickly; the most straightforward example is Adolf Hitler... When you look at it, it came with democracy; it came with elections; that is why democracy, when too many people, in fact when a human being with his ego, his arrogance, gets involved, even the most ideal system can turn into a monster (Participant 27, Male, 30, Master's degree, Liberal, Turkish).

Democracy with Preconditions

Participants argued that the implementation of democracy depends on preconditions, including economy, education, and specific social characteristics. These conditions were described as essential, and if they are not provided, it will not be possible to implement or develop democracy. However, participants differed in how they defined these conditions. For example, while democracy requires a society without collectivist characteristics for some participants, it can only exist in a hierarchical society for others. In the following quote, a participant explains this situation as follows:

Yes, I think there is no single type of democracy. In societies like Türkiye, no matter how much they say they are governed by democracy or want democracy, they need a good leader. What do I mean when I say that Türkiye has a complex social structure, cultural structure, and geographical location? Germany also comes to the fore with its leaders

(Participant 16, Female, 25, Bachelor's Degree, Socialist, Circassian).

Another participant suggested that democracy can only function in societies that have a democratic culture that requires mutual respect, tolerance, and harmony in relations between individuals and groups.

With this social division and polarization in this state, I do not believe it can reach higher levels, unfortunately... I do not think these are given much importance; polarization is at its highest level in the country, so unfortunately, I do not think our democracy can reach better levels (Participant 26, Male, 36, Bachelor's, Liberal, Turkish).

For democracy to be implemented ideally, specific well-functioning subsystems and conditions are needed. Systems such as a sound monitoring system, a properly functioning judicial institution, or a free press are believed to depend on economic prosperity. In a society that does not have economic prosperity, this situation can be exploited, preventing the healthy functioning of these systems and moving away from democracy. The following quote can be given as an example:

However, as we all said, there must be a system where minorities can easily express themselves. I do not know if it will be through those technocrats or another council or board, but there needs to be constant monitoring. We may not be able to control what decisions the majority will make. There needs to be a constitutional court to prevent this, a good press, and a publication organ; all of these are very intertwined; for all of these to happen, there must be a very prosperous society. First, in a society without economic prosperity, none of these things can happen (Participant 13, Male, 40, Bachelor's Degree, Social Democrat, Mixed-Roman-Azeri).

When education was discussed as a prerequisite, the type of education that is meant varies among participants. For example, in the following quote, an education that will provide awareness of the content of democracy is meant.

Education is the most important thing. You have such a right, look, you can use something like this, without having to explain it in tears, if this level of education is completed and brought to a certain optimum level, we will have achieved the situation we want (Participant 23; Female, 28, Undergraduate, Kemalist, Turkish).

In another quote, what is meant by education is not only formal education but also education that includes issues related to our social life, and it is thought that this education should start from childhood.

So, yes, I think something more democratic should be instilled in a child, starting from the family and even as young as birth. Therefore, if

what we call education is only compulsory education, we can go as far as raising children; it seems like we have to go back much further for democracy to function (Participant 11, Male, 29, Undergraduate, Social Democrat, Turkish).

Democracy as a Better System than the Alternatives

Participants frequently described democracy as the most preferable system of governance compared to alternative political systems. Participants emphasized that democracy is the preferable system that is more advantageous and sustainable than other systems. One of the advantages of democracy is that it gives individuals the right to determine their destiny by electing, supervising, and, when necessary, changing the administrators, allowing individuals to influence decisions that affect their lives. For example, P27 explains this situation with the following expressions:

Apart from that, when we look at history, there have been kingdoms, different systems of government, at least here, you know, we have a person that we have chosen to govern us, you know, it is also temporary, that is, it has a certain period, you know, it supervises him during this period (Participant 27, Male, 30, Master's degree, Liberal, Turkish).

Participants also described democracy as a system based on providing benefits to the people. According to this view, individuals living in democratic societies are expected to possess equal rights and opportunities. This feature was seen as one of the main reasons democracy is considered superior to other systems. The following quote can be given as an example:

For example, when I say democracy, the management approach that prioritizes the social state in the social state comes to my mind... In other words, being governed by this is better than being governed by another management with a different understanding of benefits (Participant 16, Female, 25, Bachelor's Degree, Socialist, Circassian).

Some participants emphasized that democracy is the most applicable and sustainable system in practice. For example, for P30, democracy is preferable because it is perceived as more sustainable than socialism.

Moreover, as I said, I would like everyone to live in more equal financial conditions. Yes, I wish there was a more socialist system, but since it is not sustainable, democracy is the most usable one (Participant 30, Female, 32, Master's Degree, Social Democrat, Turkish).

Some participants argued that democracy is considered a better system than its alternatives only when implemented well. For example, in the following quote, P15 expresses this situation as follows:

Democracy is generally the first thing that comes to people's minds: freedom, equality, justice, and such concepts. It is a concept that should exist when used; it is one of the best forms of government. However, when it cannot be implemented, it becomes a nasty form of government (Participant 15, Male, 39, Bachelor's Degree, Socialist, Turkish).

Despite its disadvantages, several participants still regarded democracy as the most preferable political system. For example, although democracy is evaluated by P12, whose statement is given below, as a system that is not settled, it seems preferable compared to one-man rule.

Pluralism is the first thing that comes to my mind. However, to define it more clearly, I often feel this is an antithesis of one-man rule, not a scientific thing. Most of the time, I think its dynamics are not well-established, but since we have seen or know much about one-man management, it seems preferable to all of us (Participant 12, Male, 27, Master's Degree, Liberal, Turkish).

Disadvantaged Democracy

Participants sometimes described democracy as a disadvantaged system due to structural characteristics of the system, the behavior of political actors, or problems arising during its implementation. One of the reasons for this is that the election is conducted according to the majority system. Accordingly, the majority election system, in which citizens can determine the administrators by voting or expressing their opinions on specific issues related to the country, makes the ideas of the majority valuable while invalidating the ideas of the minority community, thus moving democracy away from being a system that brings everyone together on common ground. This situation is expressed in the following quote:

I think democracy is an egalitarian but not a just system. In a democracy, because I am discussing pluralistic democracy right now. If there are 10 of us, a system where nine of us stand up, and nine of us speak out is dominant, in my opinion, this is not very fair; I think one person's word is valuable because I think (Participant 8, Male, 31, Master's Degree, Apolitical, Turkish).

Participants also noted that education, which is also a prerequisite for democracy, is one factor that makes democracy a disadvantageous system. For example, in the quote below, education is considered a factor that creates a shield against the characteristics of human nature that can make democracy a disadvantageous system, and a low level of education weakens this protective effect.

Since democracy is a form of government that deals with humans, we have our id in a psychological sense, our consciousness, and a high ego. It can trigger these if the level of education is low. In other words, its disadvantage is that it scratches human psychology; it is due to human nature. In this context, how does democracy provide a disadvantage? (Participant 23, Female, 28, Undergraduate, Kemalist, Turkish).

Participants also suggested democracy particularly is vulnerable to abuse, manipulation, or instrumentalization. The abuse of democracy is carried out by taking advantage of various gaps within its system that cause this. A sample participant statement below expresses this situation as follows:

In that respect, what I said it is right to elaborate a little more on democracy, especially its internal contradictions; I think the most important of which is that it allows people who are against democracy to come to power and overthrow that democracy by using the freedoms it offers (Participant 12, Male, 27, Master's Degree, Liberal, Turkish).

Some participants also argued that it is thought that some societies have specific religious and cultural codes that cause more abuse of democracy. This situation is expressed by a participant as follows:

No matter what we do, some cultural and religious codes are very susceptible to manipulation in states like ours. Islamists say this very well; I remember they used to say that you cannot be both Muslim and a Democrat (Participant 24; Male, 40, Undergraduate, Communist, Turkish).

Democracy Defined by Liberal Values

Participants frequently described democracy as a system based on values such as equality, justice, civil rights and freedoms, and individualism, described as liberal values. For example, for P24 in the quote below, these values seen as the defining features of democracy, and he expresses this with the following sentences:

In an ideal democracy, I would put equality and pluralism first and foremost. Everyone, regardless of their language, religion, or gender, and we are not just talking about humans; I am talking about all living creatures; the right to live is a fundamental right; let me not get into that cliché, a fundamental right... I want democratic governments to provide this equality (Participant 24, Male, 40, Undergraduate, Communist, Turkish).

Another participant expresses that the basis of democracy is the people

and that it is these liberal values that ensure that every individual within society is treated equally:

Suppose democracy is, again, in terms of the root of the word, self-governance, if the people's self-governance is the most basic right to vote and be elected. These are our democratic rights. However, at the same time, if the basis of these rights comes from equality, then the right to live and human rights are also included in democratic rights, as they will be for every person, in my opinion (Participant 25, Male, 19, High School, Conservative Democrat, Kurdish).

Democracy Defined by Economic and Social Benefits

Participants described democracy as a system that provides its citizens with economic and social well-being. Democracy means that each citizen is able to live under economically secure conditions, have a good social life, and can maintain harmonious social relationships. Participants viewed these benefits as one of the main reasons democracy is considered an ideal system. For example, for P23, democracy means prosperity; prosperity means a life where we can freely live our fundamental rights without being dependent on anyone.

Democracy is a form of government, in other words, a classic definition given to us during our education years... it is a regime form where individuals can live freely without being dependent on any human being or any external factor while living our fundamental rights (Participant 23, Female, 28, Bachelor's Degree, Kemalist, Turkish).

Democracy was also described as a social system where all citizens can benefit from rights equally regardless of their financial status. The following participant explains this:

The ideal democracy is the one that is closer to socialism. In other words, a state administration where people are deprived of certain rights because they do not have financial means is not a democratic administration. In my opinion, an ideal democracy is one where everyone can benefit in the same way regardless of their financial means. If you have money and I do not, I usually think of something like this as ideal (Participant 17; Male, 35, Master's degree, Kemalist, Tatar).

Participants also described democracy as a system that allows individuals to live in a harmonious society within a shared framework of laws and social norms. This situation is expressed in the following participant's statements:

Democracy is the harmony and equal life of individuals who constitute the public with public laws (Participant 28, Male, 34, Undergraduate, Social Democrat, Turkish).

Democracy Defined by Institutions and Procedure

Participants described democracy as a system in which citizens participate in governance and are represented equally, which looks out for the general benefit of the society and secures this structure with democratic institutions. Some participants emphasize this with expressions such as 'administration of the people,' 'administration by the people,' and 'administration of the people, by the people, for the people.' For example, P10 defines democracy as follows, meaning the participation of the people in the administration:

The first thing that comes to my mind as a definition of democracy is the people's self-government (Participant 10, Female, 29, Master's Degree, Socialist, Turkish).

The democratic system, which refers to the participation of the people in the administration, is expressed in more detail by the participant below:

If we consider that I am in a democratic environment, the decisions that people, namely the people, will choose within common goals, the decisions that will be voted on for the benefit of the people, the transactions that will be made on the basis that the majority will be provided, and thus the work will be carried out in line with the wishes of the people; the positive aspect comes in this way (Participant 21, Male, 31, Master's Degree, Apolitical, Romani).

Participants also emphasized that democracy is based on popular sovereignty, providing this with voting and being elected. For example, P27 expresses this election process as follows:

It is a form of government formed when people have specific ideas and vote according to which party or voter they fit as a result of these ideas (Participant 27, Male, 30, Master's Degree, Liberal, Turkish).

Democracy is a pluralistic system that guarantees representation for individuals and groups with different ethnic origins, beliefs, thoughts, and lifestyles. This situation is emphasized in the following statements of P16:

When I say democracy, I do not only mean the ideas and expectations of the mainstream, that is, the bare mass, but also the inclusion of my ideas, as well as the segments of society that are left out or pushed to the margins, the names and identities whose voices are not fully heard in the mainstream, in the management approach and administration (Participant 16, Female, 25, Bachelor's Degree, Socialist, Circassian).

Participants also defined democracy through the existence of transparent and independently functioning institutions that observe justice and equality. For example, P4 expresses this situation as follows:

When I say democracy, transparency, accountability, freedom of elections, and validity of laws come to my mind. (Participant 4, Male, 30, Master's Degree, Social Democrat, Turkish).

Responsibility of Democracy

For democracy to be implemented and sustained, responsibilities exist at multiple levels, including interpersonal relations and social organizations, and extends to the state. The fact that democracy includes responsibilities on such a vast scale was expressed by a participant as follows:

As citizens, everyone who makes up society has a duty, as does the one who makes the law and implements it... In other words, it will not be one person but everyone (Participant 28, Male, 34, Undergraduate, Social Democrat, Turkish).

For some participants, democracy's ability to function ideally depends on citizens fulfilling their responsibilities. One of them is the responsibility of electing representatives who can best represent the interests of the public. For example, P21 explains this situation with the following expressions:

Teacher, the first thing we can do in a democracy is to use our vote during election time; we will vote for who we support; the first thing we can do in a democracy is this (Participant 21, Male, 31, Master's Degree, Apolitical, Romani).

Another responsibility emphasized by participants was the need for citizens to be aware of their rights and fight for them when necessary. For example, P30 expresses this as follows:

There comes a defense of rights; sometimes, some of our rights are taken away from us, and someone comes out and says no, this is our legal right; you cannot take it away from us. I give the Istanbul Convention as an example... Everyone should know their rights first and work to prevent them from being taken over (Participant 30, Female, 32, Master's Degree, Social Democrat, Turkish).

The responsibilities at the social level required by democracy include organized behaviors that bring individuals together. These behaviors can be displayed through channels such as protests, demonstrations, and participation in civil society organizations, such as associations, foundations, unions, and chambers. These organizations are considered important because they provide individuals with opportunities to express their views and influence public debate. P28 expresses this situation as follows:

However, organizing will spread ideas and create awareness, and maybe there are people I think are wrong; someone needs to have a

voice... For this, we need to be able to talk about these things in a café, association, school, university, high school, or social club, and we should not become terrorists just because we talk about them (Participant 28, Male, 34, Undergraduate, Social Democrat, Turkish).

Other social movements, including protests and demonstrations, were also described as important ways in fulfilling social responsibility as a form of reaction in democracies. These movements are also one of the fundamental rights that democracy provides to individuals. P3 explains this by pointing to democratic struggles and achievements in history:

Alternatively, the reason why the prime minister got on his plane and fled to Russia in Ukraine in 2015 was because the process that started with protests and evolved into civil war, sometimes the people can win (Participant 3, Female, 31, Master's Degree, Socialist, Arab-Turkish).

Participants also emphasized the importance of interpersonal responsibilities in democratic societies. Interpersonal relations characterized by mutual respect, trust, and tolerance were considered important factors that contribute to democracy. Since it is thought that issues related to politics reduce tolerance and pave the way for conflict, these interactions should be avoided in interpersonal relations. P2 expresses this situation as follows:

However, unless there is an environment where I have to talk like this, I generally do not touch upon political issues because I do not like environments that make me tense and escalate... I do not speak in such situations because I generally think I will get angry at some point and exceed what I can say (Participant 2, Female, 20, High School, Liberal, Turkish).

Interacting with individuals from different ethnic, cultural, or religious backgrounds was also considered favorable. For example, this situation is expressed by P15 as follows:

I enjoy sitting with someone from a different ethnic group or religious identity. Because it is something I do not know or know... When I sit with people who are not like me, that is where I can feed off of (Participant 15, Male, 39, Undergraduate, Socialist, Turkish).

Participants also emphasized that the state has essential responsibilities for the proper functioning of democracy. First, the functioning of the state must be transparent and controllable. For this, all actors responsible for the functioning of the state must have specific qualifications. For example, P17 emphasizes competent administrators and explains this situation as follows:

These administrators will become mayors or governors in the country;

they will not have any material interests or relatives who will make concessions, let alone the first or the seventh degree... If we can achieve this, or if we can achieve it, societies will gradually see that democracy works (Participant 17, Male, 35, Master's degree, Kemalist, Tatar).

In addition, democratic processes that should be transparent and auditable, the state institutions, and laws need to function fairly and impartially. For example, P15 expresses this situation as follows:

In other words, governments should not be able to change the state, every level of the state... in other words, separation of powers, someone somewhere should be able to say stop to something in order for this to proceed smoothly (Participant 15, Male, 39, Bachelor's degree, Socialist, Turkish).

Limiting Democracy

Although democracy is widely accepted and supported as an ideal system, some participants believed that it may be limited or suspended for specific reasons. For example, some participants think the right to organize, accepted as a democratic right and legally protected in democracies, should be restricted because they may harm the functioning of the system. P27 expresses this situation as follows:

These organizations are not very productive because of what happened with unions in the past. I even think they harm the system (Participant 27, Male, 30, Master's Degree, Liberal, Turkish).

Some participants emphasized that such limitations are only acceptable under certain conditions. For example, the existence of a real threat to the state or society. P23 explains this situation as follows:

I think we are talking about military interventions and coups; why is a coup being carried out, and why is the armed forces doing this? First, we need to look at this... However, if it is a fight for power, if the society is left aside and the true selves are fighting there, then no, I do not want a coup (Participant 23, Female, 28, Bachelor's, Kemalist, Turkish).

Some participants argued that democratic rights may be limited in some cases if there is broad social consensus supporting such measures. For example, the various restrictions on rights and freedoms all over the world during the COVID-19 pandemic are evaluated by P16 in this context as follows:

So, if it is something like freedom to go out, as long as it is within the framework of reason and logic, you can say, okay, let us not go out. However, okay, you cannot go out, you cannot walk in the parks, but you can work like crazy in workplaces and factories... When you see

this, of course, you do something; when it is like this, it is useless (Participant 16, Female, 25, Bachelor's, Socialist, Circassian).

Democracy Without Compromise

Democracy is a system that should not be suspended or restricted under any circumstances. Compromising democracy through anti-democratic practices or restrictions can lead to negative outcomes for the both democratic system and society. For example, P13 describes this situation as follows:

Democracy is always needed in the middle of a war, even in the middle of a war... That is why I think democracy should not be abandoned under any circumstances (Participant 13, Male, 40, Bachelor's Degree, Social Democrat, Mixed-Roman-Azeri).

Another reason why democracy should never be compromised under any circumstances is that it provides democratic solutions for all negative situations and conditions that may occur. This situation is expressed by P13 as follows:

Democracy is already a system that is needed in those difficult times, and democracy is needed to combat them. It should never be suspended (Participant 13, Male, 40, Bachelor's Degree, Social Democrat, Mixed-Roman-Azeri).

Democracy on a Universal/Cultural Dimension

Democracy is evaluated as a system that can vary across universal and culture-specific dimensions for several reasons. For some participants, democracy is a universal system because of the core values it upholds. For example, P24 explains this as follows:

As I said earlier, when I take democracy as equality, if societies' sociological and geographical codes vary and democracy has to adapt to this, this can also lead us to mistakes (Participant 24, Male, 40, Undergraduate, Communist, Turkish).

Democracy is a system with evident and unchangeable principles, procedures, operations, and boundaries. Even if societies differ in language, culture, traditions, or geography, the standards and practices of democracy remain constant. For example, P30 explains this situation as follows:

I do not have an opinion on this issue, but if things are going to be different, the title may also change, the title should change. If we say this is a system like this, I put it there: if a leader has more authority than a president, I think business is leaving democracy and going to monarchy (Participant 30, Female, 32, Master's Degree, Social Democrat, Turkish).

For some participants, democracy cannot be considered a system with universal content. Societies have different dynamics and cultural structures; therefore, democracy cannot be applied in the same way everywhere and for everyone. For example, P29 explains democracy in line with culture as follows:

The old values of culture and society create us. For example, if we look at the Turkish people, we have our customs and traditions; I would like it to be by these (Participant 29, Male, 21, High School, Does not want to express political views, Turkish).

Discussion and Conclusion

Democracy has had positive, negative, and neutral meanings since ancient Greece. For example, Aristotle and Plato argued that democracy would lead to anarchy and tyranny (Markova, 2004). Similarly, democracy has positive, negative, and neutral meanings among the participants in this study. These meanings are explained in detail in this section through the themes identified in the study.

Firstly, when the themes and subthemes obtained from the study were evaluated, it was seen that individuals in Türkiye conceptualized democracy comprehensively and diversely. In addition to liberal definitions such as equality, freedom, and justice, participants also highlighted definitions that included economic and social benefits and institutions and procedures. In this sense, it is similar to the results of other studies in the literature examining attitudes and conceptualizations toward democracy in various parts of the world (e.g., Akboğa and Şahin, 2018; Akboğa and Şahin, 2021; Alacapınar, 2020; Arensmeier, 2010; Baviskar and Malone, 2004; Bratton and Mattes, 2001a, 2001b; Dalton et al., 2007; Moodie, 2005; Ottemoeller, 1998; Regt, 2013). Furthermore, these findings are similar to those of another study by Çelikadam and Cesur (2023), conducted as part of the same doctoral thesis. In that study, Çelikadam and Cesur (2023) examined the meaning evoked by the concept of democracy alone, and only the responses given to the question ‘What comes to mind when you think of democracy?’ were analyzed using thematic analysis. In the current study, participants provided evaluations on various democracy-related topics, resulting in a more comprehensive data set. Despite the differences between these two studies, the similarity of these findings is still significant. Liberal values, economic and social benefits, and institutional contents are prominent themes in terms of both what democracy evokes and the comprehensive evaluation of its dimensions.

Several findings specific to this study were also identified. Accordingly, democracy has appeared chiefly as an overly idealized system. This idealization sometimes renders democracy nearly impossible, approaching an utopian ideal. From a more moderate perspective, democracy is seen as a system that can only be realized when certain preconditions are met. In some cases, democracy may become a disadvantaged system due to the failure to meet these preconditions or due to its limitations within itself. While some believe it should be limited at the points where it is disadvantageous, others argue that it should never be compromised. To avoid these potential disadvantages, and because democracy is seen as difficult to achieve by being overly idealized, various responsibilities fall on citizens and the state in individual, social, and interpersonal areas. While it seems reasonable to think such a complicated and ideally functioning system is universal, some participants also argue that it should differ according to cultures and societies.

When participants respond to questions about democracy, they generally compare the ideal form of democracy with existing democratic systems. In other words, democracy is always discussed in terms of the contrasts between its ideal and current state. Some theorists in the literature have previously evaluated this type of binary thinking (e.g., Dahl, 2001; Sartori, 1993). This pattern has also been observed in other studies. For example, in Magioglou's (2008) study, most of the Greek participants perceived a significant gap between the ideal democracy and today's democracies and that the ideal democracy would never be possible to achieve. In the present study, this binary thinking may be related to the excessive idealization of democracy. As seen in both Magioglou's (2008) study and the present study, democracy is often excessively idealized, and this idealization sometimes turns it into an unrealizable and utopian state. This distinction can also be understood in light of Sartori's (1993) argument that modern democracies are products of ideals and emerge through a continual struggle with reality.

Since democracy is seen as an ideal that is difficult to attain, it is often believed that it can only be achieved under certain preconditions. Some theorists frequently express this idea. For example, findings from this study suggest that, for democracy to be effectively implemented and function as an advantageous system, the society needs to have a certain level of education. Papanikos (2022) similarly argues that education turns individuals into ideal citizens of a democratic society. However, consistent with the findings of this

study, he adds that education is a necessary but insufficient condition, and says that a moral society also required. This is because the concept of ‘white-collar crime’ proves that educated people can also engage in criminal behavior and undermine the processes related to democracy.

For this reason, even if society as a whole does not have a high level of education, it may still be able to govern itself by socially accepted moral and ethical norms (Papanikos, 2022, p. 357). Kuçuradi (1998) states that democracy is only possible in an educated society with democratic consciousness. The claim that this can be achieved with citizens who are aware that the state exists to protect the fundamental rights of all citizens equally is also consistent with the findings of this study.

Political culture, considered in the literature as both a prerequisite of and an indicator of a good democracy (Inglehart and Welzel, 2003; Kemahlioğlu and Keyman, 2011), also emerged as a key prerequisite in this study. It is believed that democracy is unlikely to be possible in societies that do not have interpersonal and intergroup relations that include mutual respect, tolerance, and harmony. This finding reflects other results in the study, where democracy is defined with liberal concepts such as equality, freedom, and justice and institutional components such as pluralism at the social level. These concepts are likely to remain superficial in a societies that cannot reflect these values in everyday live and social relationships. Therefore, the ideal of democracy becomes increasingly distant. However, it is seen that this emphasis is not reflected in other questions, such as how they relate to individuals with different characteristics than themselves in daily life. When the relationship orientations of the participants in the study are examined, it is seen that they avoid communication and interaction for various reasons or try to establish relationships with motivations such as overcoming the prejudices of the other party or being instructive. Therefore, participants' positive thoughts on democracy are not accompanied by tolerance, trust, and participatory perspectives in their social and interpersonal relations; they often remain superficial. According to Inglehart and Welzel (2003), although democracy has a positive image almost everywhere, unless these positive thoughts are accompanied by social relations that include tolerance, trust, and participatory perspectives, the chances of effective democracy existing at the social level are weak. From this perspective, the results of this study indicate that the political culture necessary for democracy in Türkiye has not yet been fully developed. This finding

is also consistent with the findings of other studies conducted in Türkiye (e.g., Kemahlioğlu and Keyman, 2011; Tessler and Altınoğlu, 2004) and is further reinforced when evaluated alongside them.

The idealization of democracy in this study makes it possible only under clearly defined preconditions; however, it also leads to deits evaluation as a disadvantaged system when these preconditions cannot be realized. For example, democracy is seen as a disadvantaged system because it is tconsidered vulnerable to abuse, and as evidenced in both historical and current experiences. In some cases, participants attribute this vulnerability to inherent aspects of human nature, turning democracy into a utopian phenomenon that cannot be realized. This situation is evaluated by some theorists (e.g., Dahl, 2001; Sartori, 1993) as a result of the dialectical perspective between ideal and reality, which is considered harmful for democracy. As observed in this study, evaluating democracy from an overly idealistic point of view distances it from its concrete content and makes it ineffective. Conversely, approaching it from an overly realistic point of view causes it to be seen only as a manipulative tool. Therefore, even though democracy is generally evaluated as a sound system in this study, appear to be universally desired or strongly supported, due to excessive idealization and its association with negative experiences in existing systems.

Democracy is also evaluated in this study as a system that varies in universal and culture-specific dimensions for several reasons. Whether democracy is a universal system or a system with different types and content according to cultures and societies varies among the study's participants and theorists in the literature. The waves of democratization that have emerged in the modern world underline the idea that there are many different types of democracies today and that the newly emerging democracies in Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe can be very different from each other and from traditional Western democracies. Variations in democratic practice can also be observed among Western democracies (Zimbardo et al., 2013). For this reason, researchers such as Dallmayr (1997) emphasize the need to consider cultural diversity in understanding democracy. Again, according to Dallmayr, liberal universalism and egalitarianism should be reconsidered by paying more attention to cultural heterogeneity and the politics of difference (1997, p. 282). In addition to the representations of liberal democracy identified in this study, different mean-

ings specific to this culture were also emerged, and this finding provides support for democracy discussions beyond the West.

When we look at the everyday meanings of democracy in today's cultures, the various implicit understandings of democracy and symbolic representations have not developed through a logical, sequential, or passive process but over a long historical period of intense struggle and conflict between rival ideas. Individuals and groups from different cultures, periods, and origins have integrated these tensions and conflicts of ideas into new forms. Through this dialectical transformation, both cultures and democracy are changing (Kim et al., 2002). The participants in this study also emphasized this ongoing transformation. Accordingly, democracy is a system that can vary across societies and cultures, and it will also need to be revised in response to changing conditions. As the spirit of each period evolves, the transformation of democracy becomes inevitable. From this perspective, the universal and culture-specific representations of democracy obtained in the study suggest that these ongoing conflicts of ideas and transformations continue within Turkish society.

This study was conducted using a qualitative method (Denzin and Lincoln, 1996), which provides an opportunity to deeply understand and explore participants' experiences and perspectives on a phenomenon by incorporating their own 'voices'. Considering the variety and scope of the themes obtained, this study makes a substantial contribution to the literature. Likewise, since the data of this study were analyzed using thematic analysis, quantitative measures such as the frequency or prevalence of themes were not assessed. In this respect, the study is expected to serve as an exploratory contribution, highlighting the content and diversity of conceptualizations for future research. Conducting subsequent studies with a mixed design that includes quantitative analyses with larger samples, could overcome the limitations of single-method approaches and provide a more comprehensive understanding of a complex issue such as democracy.

This study has several limitations in addition to its contributions. For example, although interviews originally planned to be held face-to-face, they were conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, difficulties in reaching participants during such a period made it challenging to achieve a balanced sample distribution, particularly in terms of education level. The majority of the participants had a higher education level. Working

with a more diverse and balanced sample would be helpful in future studies.

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