



**TECHNIUM**  
**SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL**

**Vol. 25, 2021**

**A new decade  
for social changes**

[www.techniumscience.com](http://www.techniumscience.com)

ISSN 2668-7798



9 772668 779000

## **Social representations of the democracy. Cognitions and attitudes in 34 nations**

**Silviu-Petru Grecu**

University “Al.I.Cuza”, Iași, Faculty of Philosophy and Social- Political Sciences,  
Department of Political Sciences, International Relations and European Studies/ Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
[silviu.grecu@uaic.ro](mailto:silviu.grecu@uaic.ro)

**Abstract.** This article aims to emphasize the role played by social representations for understanding democracy. In this context, the article is relevant for both political psychology and political normative theory. At the empirical level, the study has several research objectives like: i. to analyse the importance of democratic order in different geographical areas; ii. to estimate several determinants of the satisfaction with democracy; iii. to estimate a model based on social representations of the democratic order. In correlation with the research objectives, empirical findings present three main variables which are related with the satisfaction with democracy (economy, political elite and gender equality with  $p < 0.01$ ). In this context, subjective perception of the economic welfare and political elite are classical variables for explaining the dynamic of democracy. Beyond traditional and liberal framework of understanding democratic order, gender equality is relevant for more than 70% of the statistical sample. In this context, political theory should be nuanced by the empirical findings and should develop a discreet normative framework for understanding the psychological dimension of the democracy.

**Keywords.** Political cognition, social representations, equality, human rights, freedom, democracy

### **1. Social representations and political world. Toward a cognitivist perspective**

Social representations are personal manners of understanding and signifying the social world. Social cognition is a mix between individuals' image of the world and rational beliefs. This chapter emphasizes the role played by political psychology, particularly by political cognition, for observing the relation between images, cognitive processes, political attitudes and behaviors. The main “flow” of the social cognition could be presented in following steps: social representations, social “nexus”, cognitive system, social attitudes and concrete social and political behaviors. In general terms cognition refers to individual's ability of computing different information. Although, “cognition is thus a rather broad umbrella term, which includes many component processes” [1], in practice it expresses our ability of knowing and understanding the reality. A simple perspective of the cognitive processes stresses the mind ability of computing empirical or abstract information. Moreover, cognition involves a complex psychological mechanism for transforming, storing or recovering the input stimuli [2]. The cognitive mechanism is described in terms of complex system with “two proprieties: representation and calculus” [3]. In correlation with these assumptions the cognitive process

could be seen as a distinctive feature for individuals based on logical and rational manner of knowledge [4]. This feature is demonstrated by the flexible and adaptable neuropsychological infrastructure of the human brain. Thus, we can discuss about a kind a flexible brain in a very complex and dynamic reality [5]. Cognitive processes are related to brain ability of generating neural responses to different stimuli. In this respect, salient stimuli could be seen as an important vector for generating this kind of responses. At the neuropsychological level we have to underline the idea of “salient network”, in which different and correlated parts of the brain are involved in processing information [6,7,8,9].

The subfield of this research is represented by the political cognition and representations of the public space. But, this kind of approach requires a high level of interdisciplinary perspectives related to political sciences, behavior, statistical models and ideological frameworks. In this respect, we are interested to create a comprehensive design for understanding how individuals imagine democracy, compute political information and shape different political attitudes and behaviors. Democratic political regime could be seen as salient stimuli which could generate different rational or emotional responses. It is based on the historical, social, cultural and ideological context. Regarding the social and cultural perspective we can stress the idea that democratic regime generates cognitions, affects and political orientation for citizens [10,11, 12]. Their political beliefs and attitudes are dependent on the political context. For this reason we use as exploratory and salient variable the quality of national democracy.

Related to the importance of political regime in individuals’ life we are interested to evaluate their proper manner of understanding. Moreover, we consider that beyond the main conceptual approach of the democratic regime there are several particular but aggregated manners for political understanding. This kind of particular understanding reflects different levels and types of cognitive biases. If, in general terms this political regime defines the “rule of law” and people’s engagement in political life, in particular there are a lot of specific manners for imagining and interpreting the role played by the political regime in personal or public life. In this context, we use, as manner of particular understanding, the theory and practice of the social representations. In other words, social representations are images of the reality, or a kind of “common sense” regarding different aspects of our social life [13]. If Durkheim has developed a static manner for understanding social representations, Moscovici underlined the dynamic perspective of this kind of social knowledge. Moscovici presented the normative and prescriptive role played by social representations in the sphere of social cognition [14]. The main role played by social representations in the field of individual knowledge refers to: i. personal cognition and understanding of the social reality; ii. possibility of shaping individual and collective identity; iii. social and political orientation. In this respect, the main theoretical approach regarding the social representations is the *theory of central core*. J.C. Abric emphasizes the central core of the representations (as a stable cognitive *nucleus*) and the peripheral system, which is characterized by individual and particular manner of according significance to different social stimuli [15].

Social representations are related to the political and ideological framework. This fact could be demonstrated through a high level of political insertion in social life [16]. In this context, general representations of the role of the state in social life have generated different ideological systems. Related to this topic this article aims to observe how political issues are related to social representations in different contexts. Moreover, we are interested to analyze how social representations of the political phenomena could generate particular political cognitions.

Synthetizing, both social cognitions and representations reflect the subjective manner to relate to social reality. All these are the expression of human subjectivity and intentionality. Moreover, through social representations individual give meaning and significance to a complex and dynamic world: social and political reality.

## 2. Research Methodology

The main objective of this empirical research is to create a comprehensive image of the manner in which individuals from different geographical political systems perceive and represent democracy. Democracy is presented in both cases: as an axiological framework for tolerance and social order and political regime which emphasizes civil rights and political liberties. Related to this general perspective, our research objectives are: i. to analyze the importance of democratic order in different geographical areas; ii. to estimate several determinants of the satisfaction with democracy; iii. to estimate a model based on social representations of the democratic order. These objectives are related with several research questions as: “how is perceived democracy in different geographical areas?”; “there are significant differences in representing democratic order in full democracies and hybrid political regimes?” ; “could be democracy represented in terms of equality, equity and freedom in all types of political regimes?” The main hypothesis of the study is:  $h_1$ : *there are significant differences in representing democracy which depends on the historical heritage, political culture and geographical dispersion.*

For testing the research hypothesis we use secondary data extracted from Pew Research Center. In this respect were extracted data from the report “Democratic Rights Popular Globally but Commitment to Them Not Always Strong” published in 2020 [17]. The methodological framework of the study is based on standardized survey conducted by Pew Research Center during May-October 2019 in 34 nations and 38426 respondents. From these secondary quantitative data we have extracted several variables related to the perception and satisfaction with democracy. The research variables are:

**Table 1. Research Variables**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Type and Measure Scale</i>
Fair Judicial System	X <sub>1</sub>	Independent, [0;100]
Regular Elections	X <sub>2</sub>	Independent, [0;100]
Free Speech	X <sub>3</sub>	Independent, [0;100]
Gender Equality	X <sub>4</sub>	Independent, [0;100]
Free Religion	X <sub>5</sub>	Independent, [0;100]
Human Rights	X <sub>6</sub>	Independent, [0;100]
Free Opposition	X <sub>7</sub>	Independent, [0;100]
Party		
Political Elite	X <sub>8</sub>	Independent, [0;100]
Perception of the	X <sub>9</sub>	Independent, [0;100]
Current Economic		
Situation		
Satisfaction with	Y	Dependent [0;100]
Democracy		

The main methodological guideline refers to the possibility of association different factors with the satisfaction with democracy in different geographical area. The statistical sample is based on 34 nations from all the geographical areas. We selected all these units of analysis for covering different geographical, cultural and historical perspectives. Moreover in the

statistical sample we have 47.05% countries from Europe (both Western and Eastern Europe), 12.5% countries from North America, 26,46% countries from Asia (Middle, Central and Extreme Asia), 8.8% states from Africa, 5.88% from Latin America and 2.94% from Australia- Oceania. Although there are different statistical frequencies in real geographical distribution, we have used these units of analysis at the exploratory level for observing and understanding different ways of representing democratic regime. Thus, the research uses different units (states) from nondemocratic (hybrid political regimes) and democratic political regimes (as flawed democracy and full democracy). We are interested to observe geographical cleavages regarding the perception and representation of democracy. Beyond classical and traditional cleavages (East- West; North- South) we can estimate other cleavages generated by proximity or historical heritage. Thus, historical heritage is involved in shaping collective memory, collective cognition and particular manners for representing the political regime. The thesis of political culture developed in the early of 60' by Almond and Verba suggests that political affectivity and political feed-back are the main vectors for describing the role played by political culture in democratic development. In table no. 2 are presented the units of analysis and the geographical area:

**Table 2. Units of Analysis**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Geographical Area</b>
1	USA	North America
2	Canada	North America
3	Greece	Europe
4	Hungary	Europe
5	Sweden	Europe
6	UK	Europe
7	France	Europe
8	Netherlands	Europe
9	Spain	Europe
10	Germany	Europe
11	Bulgaria	Europe
12	Czech Republic	Europe
13	Italy	Europe
14	Poland	Europe
15	Slovakia	Europe
16	Lithuania	Europe
17	Ukraine	Europe
18	Russia	Europe
19	Australia	Australia-Oceania
20	Japan	Asia
21	Philippines	Asia
22	South Korea	Asia
23	Indonesia	Asia
24	India	Asia
25	Lebanon	Asia
26	Israel	Asia
27	Turkey	Asia
28	Tunisia	Asia
29	South Africa	Africa
30	Nigeria	Africa
31	Kenya	Africa
32	Argentina	South America
33	Brazil	South America
34	Mexico	North America

Starting from these premises, the article aims to develop a statistical model for identifying several determinants of democracy at the cognitive level. Moreover, we use the cartography of democratic perception and representation using Philcarto V2020 software. The statistical model is based on a polynomial equation of regression:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_n X_n + u_{ij},$$

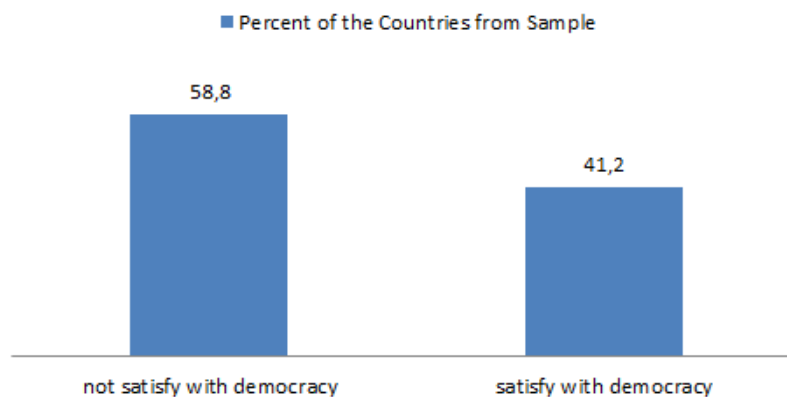
where  $X_1, n$  are factors (independent variables),  $Y$ - dependent variable (satisfaction with democracy) and  $u_{ij}$  is the coefficient of the residuals.

Research design is quantitative using both descriptive and inferential statistics for testing several associations between research variables.

### 3. Empirical findings. Gender equality, economic perception and democracy

In accord with the research objectives the study describes in a radiographic manner the evolution of democracy in 34 nations. Regarding this topic, in the figure 1 we can observe the geographical distribution of the satisfaction with democracy in all units of analysis. Moreover, in 58,8% of the political systems we estimate a low or middle level of satisfaction regarding democratic order. 41,2% of the political systems are represented by countries with a high level of trust and satisfaction with democracy. At the descriptive level on the scale between 0-100, the average of satisfaction with democracy is 46,97% with  $\sigma = 14,62\%$ . In the first quartile  $Q1=32,75$  we integrate countries like: Greece, Bulgaria, Tunisia, UK, Italy and Spain. In contrast, in the third quartile  $Q3= 59\%$  we integrate countries as Germany, Philippine, Canada, Poland, Netherlands and Sweden.

**Figure 1. Satisfaction with democracy (%)**  
**Percent of the Countries from Sample**

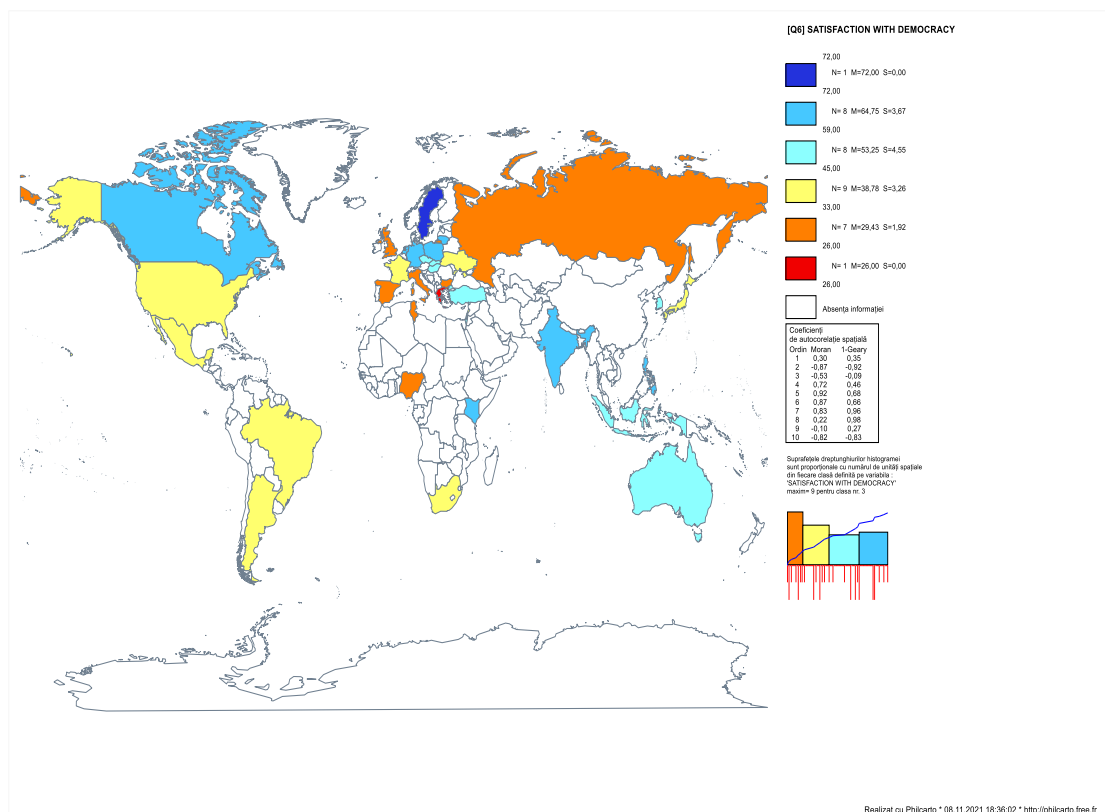


If we correlate this subjective perception of democracy with Democratic Index or other composite indicators related to the quality of the political regime we observe a high level of association in the case of full democracies. Thus, only full democracies could offer an accurate perception of the quality of the political system for their citizens. In the case of flawed democracies or hybrid political regimes we should mention the presence of the cognitive biases related to the quality of the political regime. At the geographical level, satisfaction with democracy is grouped both on the cleavage North-South in the case of European political systems and the cleavage East-West in the rest of the political regimes. In this meaning we can observe a high level of satisfaction with democracy in Scandinavia and Canada, regions with a high score of the Democratic Index, political rights and civil liberties. Lowest values of the satisfaction with democracy are incident in Latin America, South Africa and Asia. Historical experiences of the military dictatorship in Latin America and parochial political

culture in Asian countries could be several factors which negatively affect the perception and satisfaction with democracy.

The lack of political trust and legitimacy in Latin America could explain several post-authoritarian evolutions and the current perception of democracy [18]. The new security framework and the new international perspectives after 1990's generate the transition from military to civil and post-authoritarian order [19]. In this respect, in Asian countries the main variable which could explain the psychological attitude with democracy (in terms of satisfaction) is related to political culture and the role played by the political leadership in the social context. Although several Asian countries have started several democratic reforms, the parochial culture associated with the controlled-mass-media creates the image of the "uncertain" democracy [20]. Decolonization processes and the nexus with the particular type of culture and spirituality create a specific manner of understanding democracy in South Asia [21]. This fact is reflected in the high level of satisfaction with democracy met in India, where more than 70% of the respondents are satisfied with the political regime. In the figure number 2 is presented the distribution of the satisfaction with democracy in all the units of the analysis. Regarding the geographical distribution of the satisfaction with democracy we can estimate a partially grouped phenomenon with Moran Index =0.35.

**Figure 2. Satisfaction with democracy in 34 nations**



In correlation with the second research objective we estimate through a linear equation of regression several determinants of the satisfaction with democracy. In this respect, the model has  $R^2= 0,701$  with no colinearity effects between variables:

**Table 3. Models of regression. Linear equations**

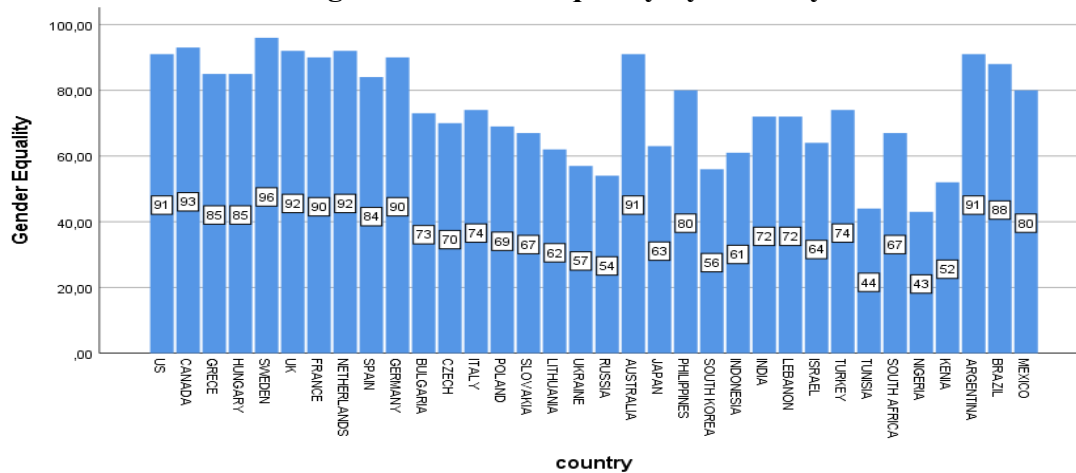
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta				Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	79.575	5.385			14,777	,000		
	economic_perception	-1,039	,163	-.748		-6,377	,000	1,000	1,000
2	(Constant)	60.755	8.713			6.973	,000		
	economic_perception	-.807	,174	-.581		-4.647	,000	,742	1,347
	political_elite	,336	,128	,328		2.624	,013	,742	1,347
3	(Constant)	44.545	10.365			4.298	,000		
	economic_perception	-.842	,161	-.606		-5.217	,000	,737	1,357
	political_elite	,318	,119	,311		2.678	,012	,740	1,352
	gender_equality	,242	,097	,249		2.489	,019	,992	1,008

At the inferential level, we estimate that the satisfaction with democracy is related with the perception of the current economic situation ( $\beta = -0.606$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), political elite ( $\beta = 0.311$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ) and gender equality ( $\beta = 0.249$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ). In accord with these empirical models, we can estimate that economic welfare and subjective perception of economic welfare could be an important variable for explaining the dynamics of the attitudes regarding democracy. This result confirms the main hypothesis of the democratization studies which emphasizes the role played by the economic performance and indicators in generating democratic attitudes and behaviors [22]. Economic freedom and entrepreneurial perspectives could be good statistical indicators in the perception and representation of the democracy [23].

Beyond the classical manner of understanding democracy, we have to underline the role played by the political elite and gender equality. Thus, the first variable, political elite, is important for understanding in terms of legitimacy the democratic regime. Thus, the main scholars of the normative theory of democracy have defined democracy in terms of political participation, free election and political elite. Moreover, this statistical result should be associated with the normative reflections of democracy. In this case social order and democratic practices are realized by elected officials and political elite [24, 25].

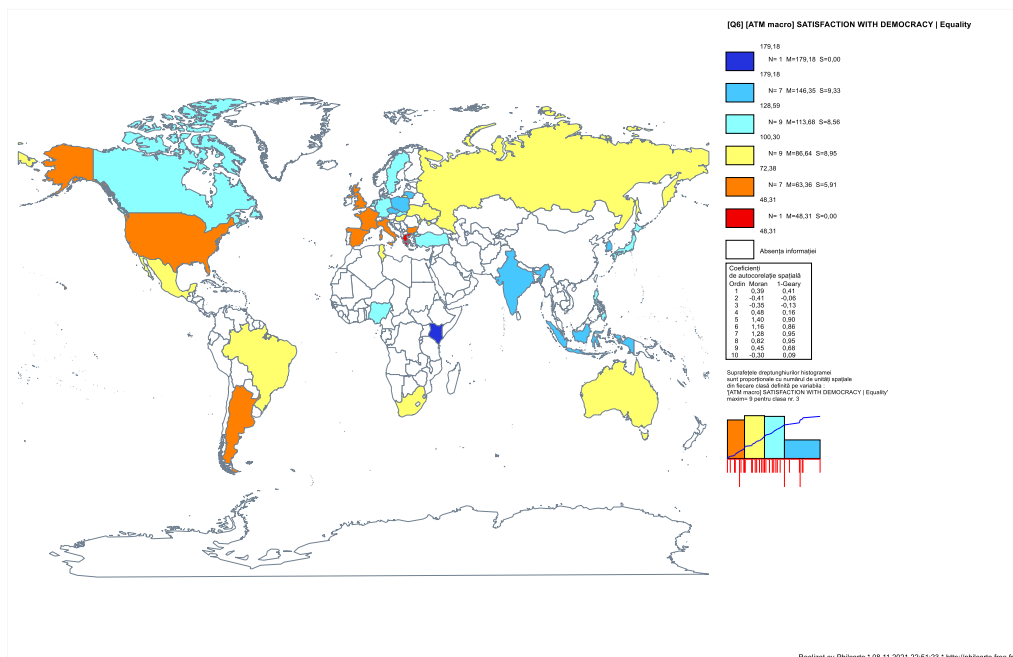
The third variable which could explain the dynamics of the representations about democracy is gender equality. In this respect, there is a low but positive and statistically significant correlation between gender equality and the satisfaction with democracy.

**Figure 3: Gender Equality by Country**



In the figure 3 are presented values for gender equality in all 34 nations. We can observe that this variable is relevant for more than 70% of the respondents from the statistical sample. In this context statistical indicators reflect that gender equality is relevant with the average 74,17% with standard deviation 15,09%. The lowest values of the gender equality are incident in Africa (South Africa= 67%, Nigeria= 43% and Kenya = 52%). In contrast, consolidated democracies emphasize the role played by gender equality in social structure. In this sphere, in Western countries (USA, Canada, Western Europe or Scandinavia) gender equality is very important for more than 85% of the respondents. Middle values are met in post-communist countries and in the proximity of the Russian Federation, where this variable is important for 55-65% of the respondents. The figure 4 presents the conditionality between satisfactions with democracy if gender equality is a very important variable. Thus, we can observe the same geographical cleavage as in the case of satisfaction with democracy with similar coefficient of geographical distribution (Moran Index= 0,38).

**Figure 4. Satisfaction with democracy and gender equality**



Synthesizing, empirical findings suggest that classical variables as economy and political elite remain the central core of the representations of democracy. But, in addition to the liberal values, gender equality is an important variable for understanding the dynamics of democracy in the contemporary world. The importance of this variable is demonstrated by the empirical evidence and the normative reflections of democracy.

#### 4. Conclusions

This article emphasizes the role played by liberal axiology in shaping representations of the democratic regime. The central core of the political psychology should be represented by the relation between perception, cognition and political attitudes. In this respect, this study creates an analytical framework of the representations of democracy. Beyond classical models, the study presents the role played by the subjective economy in shaping attitudes and representations of democracy. For the most part of the respondents economic perception and economic welfare are strongly related to the democratic axiology. Economic freedom and entrepreneurial attitudes could be seen as the main social and economic vectors of the democratic regime. In correlation with the economic dimension, democracy is represented in terms of the political elite, freedom and gender equality. Classical perspectives under democracy should be nuanced by the empirical reality and empirical findings. In this manner the statistical model could be an important epistemological tool for shaping new normative directions in the theory and practice of the democracy.

#### References

- [1] D. Groome, N. Brace, et.al: An Introduction to Cognitive Psychology, Processes and Disorders, ISBN: 978-1-84872-091-6, p. 28, London&New York: Psychology Press, 2014.
- [2] U.G. Neisser: Cognitive Psychology, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967.
- [3] M. Miclea: Psihologie cognitivă, Modele teoretico-experimentale, ISBN: 973-683-248-1, p. 26 Iași: Editura Polirom, 2003.
- [4] M. Zlate: Psihologia mecanismelor cognitive, ISBN: 973-46-0570-4, Iași: Editura Polirom, 2006.
- [5] S. J. Cowley, F. Vallée-Tourangeau: Cognition Beyond the Brain. In: S. J. Cowley, F. Vallée-Tourangeau, Computation, Interactivity and Human Artifice, ISBN 978-3-319-49115-8, London: Springer-Verlag, p. 3, 2013.
- [6] R. Veale, Z. M. Hafed, M. Yoshida: How is visual salience computed in the brain? Insights from behaviour, neurobiology and modelling. *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B*, ISSN: 0261-0523 372, (2017).
- [7] S. Krasovskaya, W. J. MacInnes, Salience Models: A Computational Cognitive Neuroscience Review, *Vision*, ISSN 2411-5150, 3, (56), (2019).
- [8] J. S. Morris, K. J. Friston, R. J. Dolan: Neural Responses to Salient Visual Stimuli, *Proceedings: Biological Sciences*, ISSN 0962-8452: 264, 1382, (1997).
- [9] A. P. Pinheiro, C. Barros, J. Pedrosa, Salience in a social landscape: electrophysiological effects of task-irrelevant and infrequent vocal change, *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, ISSN 1749-5016, 1–13, (2015)
- [10] G. Almond, S. Verba: Cultura Civică, Atitudini politice și democrație în cinci națiuni, ISBN: 973-97309-0-6 București: Editura Du Style, 1997.
- [11] G. Almond, G. Powell, K. Strøm: Comparative Politics Today, A World View, ISBN: 978-0133807721, New York: Pearson Longman, 2004.
- [12] K. Newton, J. Wan Deth: Foundations of comparative politics, ISBN: 978-0-521-19988-

- 9, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- [13] S. Moscovici: On Social Representations, In J.P.Forgas, *Social Cognitions, Perspectives on Everyday Understanding*, ISBN-13: 978-0122635601, pp.181-209, London: Academic Press, 1981.
- [14] S. Moscovici: Fenomenul reprezentărilor sociale, In A. Neculau, *Reprezentările Sociale*, ISBN: 973-96937-0-9, pp.15-72, Iași: Editura Polirom, 1997.
- [15] J.C.Abric: Reprezentările sociale: aspecte teoretice, In A. Neculau, *Reprezentările Sociale*, ISBN: 973-96937-0-9, pp.107-122, Iași: Editura Polirom, 1997.
- [16] P.Moliner: Cinci întrebări în legătură cu reprezentările sociale, In A. Neculau, *Reprezentările Sociale*, ISBN: 973-96937-0-9, pp.145-153, Iași: Editura Polirom, 1997.
- [17] Pew Research Center, Democratic Rights Popular Globally but Commitment to Them Not Always Strong, February, 2020,  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/27/democratic-rights-popular-globally-but-commitment-to-them-not-always-strong/>
- [18] B. Farcau: The Transition to Democracy in Latin America : The Role of the Military, ISBN: 978-0275956363, Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996.
- [19] G. Marcella, Warriors in Peacetime, The Military and democracy in Latin America, New Directions for US Policy, ISBN 0-7146-4585-0, Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass, 1994.
- [20] K. Sen, T.Lee, Political Regimes and the Media in Asia, ISBN13: 978-0-415-40297-2, New York: Routledge, 2008.
- [21] S. Bose, A. Jalal, Modern South Asia, History, Culture and Political Economy, ISBN: 978-1-138-24363-7, New York: Routledge, 2018.
- [22] A. Aslund, How Capitalism was Built, ISBN: 978-1139207850, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- [23] A. Przeworzki Adam, Democracy and the Market, Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America, ISBN: 978-0521423359, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001.
- [24] G. L. Munck, Measuring Democracy, A Bridge Between Scholarship & Politics, ISBN: 978-0801890932, Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.
- [25] A. Dahl, Democrația și criticii ei, ISBN: 973-611-191-1, Iași: Institutul European, 2002.