

Attitudes towards democracy in the Basque Country are becoming more transactional

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Abstract: This article explores shifting democratic attitudes in the Basque Country, focusing on satisfaction, legitimacy, and emotional attachment to democracy. Drawing on qualitative data from focus groups, it examines how perceptions of democratic effectiveness influence these key dimensions of political culture. While most Basque citizens uphold democracy as an essential system, there is a growing divide between support for democratic ideals and satisfaction with its practical functioning. The findings suggest an attitudinal shift toward a more transactional view of democracy, particularly among younger generations, who increasingly evaluate it based on its ability to deliver tangible outcomes, such as economic stability and quality public services. This transactional mindset contrasts with older generations' enduring attachment to democracy, shaped by historical struggles against authoritarianism. The study highlights how generational and societal changes are challenging traditional conceptions of legitimacy and affect, dimensions previously seen as stable and insulated from short-term performance metrics. Although current indicators of satisfaction are positive, the growing emphasis on immediate results raises questions about the resilience of democratic engagement and institutional trust in the region. The article situates these trends within broader global patterns and Basque historical contexts, offering insights into the evolving relationship between citizens and democratic governance. By revealing these shifts, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how changing democratic attitudes may impact social cohesion, civic responsibility, and the long-term sustainability of Basque institutions.

Keywords: Political culture; Transactional democracy; Legitimacy; Affect; Generational shifts.

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Introduction

In early 2023, Arantzazulab commissioned a survey to explore social perceptions of democracy in the Basque Country, operating under the hypothesis that attitudes toward democracy are diverse and shaped by varying perspectives. This diversity highlights the need to interpret public debates in ways that capture the nuanced dynamics of democratic culture (Eizagirre and Baztan, 2024a). For example, elections remain a cornerstone of democratic legitimacy for most citizens (Manin, 1997), but the persistent gap between democratic ideals and practical engagement raises questions about the nature of electoral legitimacy (Van Reybrouck, 2016).

Survey findings (Arantzazulab, 2023) revealed a widening divide between support for democracy as an ideal and satisfaction with its real-world functioning. Understanding the factors influencing procedural legitimacy—such as affective orientations, identification with governing parties, and generational perspectives on democracy—requires a deeper qualitative approach to supplement survey data (Eizagirre and Baztan, 2024b). This article takes up that challenge, using qualitative data from focus groups to explore the affective dimension of Basque political culture and its implications for democratic engagement.

A new hypothesis emerges from our analysis: an attitudinal shift is reshaping how Basque citizens view democracy. Increasingly, democracy is framed in *transactional* terms, where engagement is conditional upon the system's ability to deliver tangible benefits such as economic stability, quality public services, or policy outcomes. Particularly among younger generations, this transactional mindset positions democratic participation as a strategic, pragmatic act rather than a commitment to shared civic values. The shift, while reflective of broader global trends, risks undermining long-term civic engagement and the stability of democratic institutions.

To examine these dynamics, this article analyzes qualitative data from 18 focus groups, focusing on how perceptions of democratic effectiveness influence emotional attachment to democracy. The findings suggest that legitimacy and affect—traditionally considered stable components of democratic culture—are increasingly tied to short-term performance metrics. While quantitative indicators of democratic satisfaction in the Basque Country show positive trends, the

growing emphasis on transactional engagement poses potential challenges for democratic resilience, particularly as generational attitudes evolve.

This exploration situates local democratic culture within a broader context of historical and global transformations, offering insights into the future of democratic governance not only in the Basque Country, but also in other regions. Indeed, Basque society is sometimes seen as a sort of social and political laboratory, a privileged vantage point (*atalaia* in Basque) from which it is possible to approach the emerging forms and scales of contemporary democracy (Zabalo *et al.*, 2023).

Conceptual framework

While scholarly attention has increasingly focused on instrumental, procedural and authoritarian conceptions of democracy (Norris, 2011), the specific notion of “transactional democracy” remains relatively underexplored, despite societal shifts that appear to foster its emergence. Economic pressures such as inequality and insecurity encourage people to focus on immediate material gains from the political system. Declining institutional trust has led many to see democratic governance not as an inherent good but as a mechanism for solving problems efficiently. The digital age reinforces these attitudes by promoting instant gratification, making citizens less patient with complex and deliberative democratic processes. Additionally, exposure to alternative governance models, like technocratic regimes perceived as efficient, has fueled skepticism about democracy's long-term effectiveness.

Understanding democracy as a multiplicity of “transactions” sees governance as a delivery of services in which citizens are users, consumers, or clients of public services provided by the state. This approach often reduces political issues to passive interactions, focusing primarily on service planning and delivery. Even in participatory processes that emphasize reason and deliberation, the transactional logic can persist when citizens have limited power to challenge the process or are constrained by institutional agendas—leading to what can be termed “pseudo-participation” (McCord and Becker, 2023).

From a complex understanding of democracy (Innerarity, 2020), the impacts of transactional democracy might be conceptualized as both positive and negative. On the positive side, it can push governments to be-

come more responsive and accountable, ensuring that they address citizens' immediate needs and priorities. Although there are alternative ways of conceptualizing "transaction" that are more aligned with democratic values (Thayer-Bacon, 2006), there are also risks. By focusing on short-term, individual benefits rather than long-term, community values such as participation, equality, or fairness, transactional attitudes weaken the collective responsibility and shared identity essential for sustaining democratic systems. This shift may ultimately erode the possibility of collaborative and inclusive forms of governance, leaving democratic institutions vulnerable to further polarization and disengagement.

In this framework, legitimacy and affect, traditionally seen as resilient to fluctuating circumstances, may now be more vulnerable to adverse socio-economic conditions. While this transactional view may drive greater accountability in the short term, it poses long-term risks. By anchoring legitimacy and affect to performance, democratic stability could be undermined when outcomes fail to meet citizens' expectations. This highlights a critical challenge: how to balance the citizens' growing demand for immediate results with the need to preserve the foundational principles and long-term resilience of democratic systems?

Data collection and methods

To address those research questions amongst others, qualitative data were gathered through 18 focus groups conducted across the Basque Autonomous Community (6 in Araba, 6 in Bizkaia, and 6 in Gipuzkoa) between late 2023 and early 2024. The discussions were held in both Spanish and Basque. The focus groups were gender-balanced and included participants from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Of the 18 groups, 6 consisted of individuals aged 18-29, while the remaining 12 included participants aged 30-65. The transcripts were manually categorized and interpreted through multiple rounds of analysis by the research team. Preliminary results were cross-checked with the survey data and discussed with the Arantzazulab collaborative research team in several meetings throughout 2024.

In addition, information collected from interviews with experts and academics was used as a "triangulation method" to test the conclusions drawn from the

focus groups, thereby enhancing the credibility and robustness of the analysis. 10 interviews conducted in 2023 provide an additional layer of evidence, particularly around two key themes:

1. Crisis of intermediation and commodification of politics: Three interviews explicitly mention an "intermediation crisis," a perceived weakening of traditional channels of democratic representation.
2. Perceived disconnection between institutions and citizens: This is a recurring theme in both the interviews and the Arantzazulab survey results. According to items P5 and P6, a majority of respondents feel that ordinary citizens have very little or no influence in politics (64,1%). Two out of three also perceive that politicians care little or not at all about what people think (66,7%).

The empirical convergence across three sources—focus groups, interviews, and survey data—pointed to a "transactional hypothesis" because they reveal a pattern in which democratic engagement is not driven by intrinsic commitment to democratic values, but rather by pragmatic considerations based on perceived benefits, responsiveness, or personal relevance.

Findings

The dataset employed is a convenience sample, meaning that the participants were selected based on their availability and relevance to the research objectives, rather than through a random or statistically representative process. As such, it may not fully reflect the broader Basque population's views on the subject.

However, the sample provides valuable insights into Basque political culture. A comparative analysis shows that democratic participation is different across different age groups, specifically focusing on adults aged 18-29 and older adults. Table 1 provides a nuanced breakdown of how these two demographic segments engage with political processes, highlighting both shared perspectives and distinctive approaches to civic involvement. By examining various participation areas—from electoral engagement to digital activism—the table reveals the complex ways different generations interact with democratic institutions, showing that while some fundamental values are consistent, age groups bring unique priorities, strategies, and motivations to their political participation.

Table 1
General opinions about democratic participation

Democratic participation	Elements shared by young and older adults	Specific elements and nuances (young adults, 18-29)	Specific elements and nuances (older adults, 30-65)
Electoral participation	Show dissatisfaction with the current democratic system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Disinterest in politics, except when decisions directly impact their lives — Selective and punctual participation — Reactive relationship with democracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — More structural criticism of political system — Recognize democratic progress — Appreciate voting as a right — Compare current system favorably to past authoritarian regimes
Direct participation	Agree that direct democracy participation is locally important	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Focus on specific issues affecting daily life (environment, healthcare, education) — Thematic and interest-driven approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Emphasize technological tools (electronic voting, digital ID) — Pragmatic approach — Value local political proximity — Demand mechanisms to hold governments accountable
Consultative participation	Limited data available	Limited data available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Deep dissatisfaction with current consultative mechanisms — Criticize predefined consultations — Skeptical about government's sincerity
Community participation	Recognize importance of community involvement through NGOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Diverse activism across various spaces — Change-oriented perspective — High energy for collective action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — More pragmatic approach — Participate in unions and charitable activities — Secondary priority compared to other life concerns
Activism and civil society participation	Limited data available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — More online and community-based activism — Less interested in traditional protest methods — At the forefront of social movements (gender, environment) 	Limited data available
Social media and digital participation	Limited data available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — View social media as equivalent to traditional activism — Value immediate and interactive platforms — Symbolic actions such as “giving likes” and sharing online content 	Limited data available

To provide more detail, certain statements were selected for inclusion in the analysis due to their direct relevance. These quotes were chosen for their ability to highlight key themes and trends that support the core arguments being presented, particularly regarding the evolving perceptions of democracy in the context of accelerated political times and the transactional hypothesis.

Some of these selected quotes are presented in Table 2. It aims to facilitate a clearer understanding of the relationship between participants' responses and the overarching theoretical framework that guides this research. The inclusion of these quotes is intended to illustrate the ways in which the observed trends manifest in real-world expressions, offering a qualitative dimension to the quantitative analysis.

Table 2
Particularly meaningful quotes about democratic participation

No.	Quote	Interpretation
1	<i>"Nik uste dut gu ez garela bizi demokrazia baten ze bozkatzea lau urterero eta gainera bozkatzen dugu hemen herrian, bozkatu dugu partido batera, gero hemen partidoak beste batekin urteteko egiten du paktua "con el demonio por lo que sea", orduan bai bozkatzen dugu gure iritzia ez dakit, egia esanda, gauza aurrera doan, ze guk bozkatzen diogu partido bati eta gero partidoak egiten du justo kontrakoa daukan idea baten partiduagaz pakto bat bere gauza kontrakoak ez irtetzeko."</i>	Reflects disenchantment with the democratic system, perceiving that parties do not respect voters' will and make deals with ideologically opposite parties.
2	<i>"Nik uste dut demokrazia apur bat hermetikoa, oso hermetikoa dela, ez? Parte hartzea bakarrik bideratzen dela 4 urtetan bozkatzera eta ez dago beste herritarrekiko beste interakziorik, ez?"</i>	Criticism of democratic participation being limited to voting every 4 years, without other forms of interaction with citizens.
3	<i>"Ez naiz fio instituzioetaz, ze instituzioak azkenian, ba... da buru bat, pertsona bat, da hori, pertsonak esaten duena egiten dute eta ez baduzu hori egiten, kanpora zoaz."</i>	Shows distrust towards institutions, seeing them as controlled by personal interests rather than the common good.
4	<i>"Ni ez naiz, ez nau ez politika, ez elkarte, ez sindikatu... ez nago inon ere parte hartzen eta bueno."</i>	Reflects disengagement and lack of participation in political or trade organizations.
5	<i>"Nik uste dut Estatu mailan bai aldaketa bai nabaritu dela urtetan, zegoen bipartidismo horretan sartuta zeudela, (...) gobernatzeko zutenak eta memento honetan badaude joko horretan beste alderdi politiko batzuk sartuta daudenak ere bai. Bipartidismo hori puskatu da, urteetan eduki duguna Estatu mailan, EAEn ba bueno, beti izan dugu zera berdina eta nik ez dakit. Ni nahiko kritikoa naiz eh, EAeko eta demokraziarekin orokorrean. Nik oso hermetikoa ikusten dut."</i>	Critiques the lack of political alternation in the Basque Country, viewing the system as hermetic and unchanged.
6	<i>"Nik uste dut gero eta jende gehiago, gero eta alderdi gehiago ulertzen badira gai konkretu batean, hobeto."</i>	Suggests that people value concrete results and the ability to reach agreements on specific issues over broad ideologies.
7	<i>"Nik uste dut herri mailan lehenengo hasten zara gertuenetakoaz etxean, hori España mailan eh, orain dabilzan borroka hortan..."</i>	Expresses a preference for a closer and more local democracy, in contrast to political struggles at the state level.

8	<i>“Ni batez ere zentratu naiz hemengo egoeran, Euskal Herrian dagoen egoera soziopolitikoak ba uste dut dela eboluzio bat azkenengo urtetako ba aldaketa txikiekin baina bueno antzerako egoera ikusten dut nik, ezta?”</i>	Reflects a perception of stagnation or very slow changes in the sociopolitical situation, potentially leading to frustration with the democratic system.
9	<i>“Nik uste, bai, demokrazia, bai, modurik egokiena dela. Nik uste dut baietz, eta bueno, nik ze definizio daukat ba nik nere garaian eskolan erakustean demokrazia dela ba herritarrek aukeratzen dutela nor dagoen (...) kontzeptu horrekin. Azkenean orain etxean duguna, ba bozkatu baina EAE da... nik uste dut Espainian bezela, demokrazia batean gaude. Eta bueno, hobetu liteke, zeargatik karo zer gertatzen da.”</i>	Expresses a view of democracy as the best system, but with a need for improvements, suggesting an evaluation based on performance.
10	<i>“Guk azkenian lau urtetik behin bozkatzeko dugu lista batzutura, partido politikoek ipintzen dizkigutenak. Edo honi, edo honi. Nik uste dut adibidez, auzo txikietan euren ordezkaria irtetzeko nik uste dut bat da, ba herri txiki bat da, bost auzo dauzka eta auzoko bakoitzak bozkatzeko du nork ordezkatu behar duen beren tartekoei, eta euren artean gero ba aukeratzen da udaletxera nork joan behar duen herri hortatik joatera bozkatzera.”</i>	Critiques the closed-list system and advocates for more direct, local representation, indicating dissatisfaction with the current system and a desire for more participatory democracy.
11	<i>“Nik uste dut demokrazia on batean hori ezingo zela izan.”</i>	Suggests that certain political practices should not happen in a “good democracy,” implying an evaluation of the system based on its real functioning.
12	<i>“Nik uste dut demokrazia azkenean berdintasunean oinarritu behar den sistema politiko bat izan behar dela, eta ni alde hortatik, lehen esan dudana bezala, apur bat kritikoa bai naiz demokraziarekin, ez?”</i>	Reflects the idea that democracy should be based on equality but expresses some critical views of democracy.
13	<i>“Sinistu nahi dut baietz, ez dut imajitzen gizartea diktadura batean komunismo batean. Sinistu nahi dut baietz.”</i>	Suggests a deep commitment to the belief in democracy, as the speaker cannot imagine living under a dictatorship or communism.
14	<i>“Nik demokrazia eredu politiko ona dela uste dut baina ikusten dut hor gabezia handiak egon direla, ustelkeria kasuak egon direla eta horrek sortu du itzelezko haserrea herritarren artean, ez? Eta konfiantza, eza, ez? Eta orduan uste dut oso garrantzitsua dela baita ere parte hartzea herritarren parte hartze hori, kultura hori indartzea.”</i>	Believes that democracy is a good political system but acknowledges its flaws, particularly corruption, and stresses the importance of strengthening citizen participation.
15	<i>“Nik hori, bai uste dut demokrazian badela gobernatzeko modurik egokiena. Besterik ez dut buruan behintzat, besterik ez dago.”</i>	Considers democracy the best form of government, with no other viable alternatives in mind.

In general, older participants expressed more clearly the importance of democracy and a willingness to defend it, while the transactional trend is more visible in younger adults. However, the hypothesis of increasing transactional attitudes towards democracy does not appear explicitly in the focus group transcriptions—that is our own way of collectively making sense of the results.

Based solely on these quotes it is not possible to quantify these trends or draw historical comparisons, but they do reflect recognizable ideas and attitudes.

The transactional tendency can be inferred from the *subtext* of numerous comments, where democracy is not valued intrinsically but rather in relation to its abil-

ity to address specific issues or protect interests, lifestyles, or the current quality of life. This subtext appears in several forms: citizens questioning the value of democracy when it does not solve everyday problems; criticism of democracy when it creates more problems than it seems to resolve; loss of trust in the democratic system due to perceived widespread corruption; or frustration with the excessive bureaucratization or regulation associated with democratic processes.

Those arguments and complaints, taken together, could be interpreted as masking a total rejection of the democratic system, though they are rarely expressed so directly. One could extract a very negative diagnosis: the political culture of Basque citizenship is marked by negative emotions; political information is associated with disenchantment, distrust, skepticism, disillusionment, and fatigue. This political disaffection is attributed, amongst other reasons, to the partisanship of the media. However, when contrasting this qualitative assessment with data from other empirical studies, doubts arise. For example, in the Basque Sociometer 83 (field work, March 2024) two out of three citizens rate the political situation in the Basque Country as “good” (62%) or “very good” (4%). In contrast, almost three-quarters of the Basque population think that Spanish politics is “bad” (43%) or “very bad” (29%). The initial analysis suggests a negative sentiment towards political engagement, but a closer look at the survey data reveals a more nuanced picture.

The data highlights a significant contrast between perceptions of Basque regional politics, which are mostly positive, and Spanish national politics, which are predominantly negative. Additionally, there is a noticeable disconnect between the perceived emotional tone of political discourse (largely negative) and actual assessments of political situations, which are not as hard. This aligns with insights from Table 1 on selective and reactive political participation, where citizens tend to engage primarily with issues that directly affect their lives. Interestingly, the results do not indicate that young Basques are depoliticized. As Larrinaga *et al.* (2021) argue, perceiving them as such reflects a narrow, institution-focused understanding of politics limited to parties, elections, and formal structures. Instead, an “individualization” of youth political practices and struggles is evident—a global phenomenon not confined to the Basque context (Larrinaga *et al.*, 2023).

Furthermore, explicit criticism of democracy as a system is largely absent from the dataset. This might be

explained by several factors: democracy’s continued dominance as the hegemonic ideology in Basque society, a reluctance to appear authoritarian or anti-democratic, and potential social desirability bias among focus group participants. However, adopting Jane Mansbridge’s (2012) “deliberative-systemic” perspective offers a richer understanding of political participation. While partisan dynamics and negative emotions may seem to undermine deliberation at the micro level, Mansbridge contends they do not necessarily compromise the democratic system. Even entities with low deliberative quality can meaningfully contribute to the broader deliberative system.

Democratic participation is inherently complex. Negative emotions or partisan dynamics do not automatically signal systemic failure but may instead reflect dynamic, ongoing processes of political dialogue. These processes involve the negotiation of diverse perspectives, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of democratic institutions. This perspective shifts the focus from immediate emotional reactions to a deeper appreciation of democracy’s capacity to evolve and sustain itself through continuous interaction and negotiation.

The data points to a growing transactional relationship with democracy, where engagement is driven less by ideology and more by perceived relevance and results. Rather than indicating apathy, this reflects a shift toward performance-based participation rooted in personal impact. This is consistent with what the quantitative survey says about the feelings towards democracy by age group (Table 3): commitment to democracy clearly increases with age, reaching nearly 64% among those aged 65 and older; indifference and distrust are more common among the youngest group (18-29 years old); enthusiasm is generally low in middle-aged groups but higher among seniors (65+), and irritation tends to decrease steadily with age.

Additionally, some observations can be made based on focus group conversations that mention age or refer to youth. For example, a 30-year-old primary education teacher from Durango says: “*Eta bueno, albisteak eta ez ditut ikusten, ez zaizkit gustatzen, ez dut ikusten telebista, uste dut dena dela gezurrak, gauza negatiboak edo txarrak, orduan... nahiago dut ez ikusi eta lasai bizi informatuta egotea baino.*” This comment reflects a disillusioned and skeptical attitude toward the media and political information, which could be interpreted as a more transactional attitude. Conversely, an older participant

(60 years) says: “Nik uste, bai, demokrazia, bai, modurik egokiena dela. Nik uste dut baietz, eta bueno, nik ze definizio daukat ba nik nire garaian eskolan erakusten zuten demokra-

zia dela ba herritarrek aukeratzen dutela nor dagoen (...) kontzeptu horrekin.” This comment appears to express a more traditional, less transactional view of democracy.

Table 3
Feelings towards democracy by age group (survey data from Arantzazulab, 2023)

Age	Commitment	Distrust	Enthusiasm	Indifference	Irritation	(no answer)
18-29	45.43 %	13.83 %	4.94 %	26.42 %	7.41 %	1.98 %
30-45	48.49 %	13.59 %	4.03 %	21.98 %	10.07 %	1.85 %
46-64	55.75 %	11.68 %	5.66 %	18.94 %	5.84 %	2.12 %
65+	55.52 %	6.75 %	8.90 %	11.53 %	4.12 %	13.18 %

However, it is important to note that these observations are limited, and we cannot draw a firm conclusion about generational differences in attitudes toward democracy based solely on this data. Although there are some indications that younger participants may have more critical or transactional attitudes toward democracy due to being farther removed from the anti-Franco memory and more immersed in the neoliberal cultural framework, it is not possible to draw a definitive conclusion about generational differences based on the information provided in the focus groups.

What we propose then is that the shift towards a more transactional attitude towards democracy among participants appears to be justified within a more general social discourse that accuses politicians themselves of operating with a neoliberal understanding of politics and democracy. This is suggested by a sort of “reciprocity” in which citizens feel justified in conditioning their support for democracy based on the perceived utilitarian behavior of politicians.

For instance, the view of politics as a transactional and self-serving system is reflected in the words of a 45-year-old journalist from Algorta: “O sea, quiero decir, ellos están ahí para los premios, en votar y en subirse el sueldo, salvo alguna excepción. [...] Creo que ellos se engordan todo lo que pueden y habría que hacer un balance de cuando entran en política el patrimonio que tienen y cuando salen cuanto tienen. Porque vamos, es de vergüenza.” This perception of self-interest in politics extends to the dynamics between parties, as expressed by a computer scientist from Bilbao: “La democracia, nosotros hemos puesto lo bonito, o sea, precisamente lo que no es democracia es que los partidos estén dando de hostias siempre entre ellos.

Eso para mí no es democracia.” The idea that politicians only care about citizens during elections is expressed by the journalist from Algorta: “de los ciudadanos se acuerdan de ellos cuando necesitan sus votos, ¿no? Para las elecciones, pero luego la legislatura dura y dura... y luego... cae en el olvido...”. The most radically transactional view is captured in the perception of politics as a closed, corrupt system by a 38-year-old engineer from Bilbao: “yo creo que eso es una mafia, negocio y mentira esto. Una trama y no sé sí. Como yo decía, banda, mafia, no sé... que al final esto es un tejemaneje... siempre ganan los mismos y todos barren para casa.”

In this sense, there is already a public discourse that conceives democracy as a personal business of political parties. As the journalist from Algorta says: “unos pocos deciden y es como su tablero.” This cycle of distrust appears to generate a negative reciprocity effect, as suggested by a 36-year-old graphic designer from Leioa: “¿Entonces también luego consecuencias al no dar valor a las a las instituciones, pues si puedo trincar también como ciudadano, eh? Pues una ayuda por aquí o tengo por allá, pues la trinco, porque total, luego si no estos van a hacer lo mismo.”

If politicians are “there to grab” and it is “their game,” so to speak, why can’t I have a transactional relationship with democracy? These perceptions suggest that the transactional view of democracy among citizens may be, in part, a response to the perception of a disconnected, self-serving political class focused on its own interests. In other words, citizens tend to justify a “market-based”, transactional, self-interested view of democracy because it is the framework under which politicians are perceived to operate.

Discussion

Our interpretation of the findings is organized into four sub-sections. We argue that contemporary political culture in the Basque Country is a complex and multifaceted narrative, shaped by historical struggles and evolving societal perspectives. Far from a static concept, democracy here is a dynamic process shaped by diverse political currents, generational shifts, and changing societal attitudes. This section argues that (1) some democratic values traditionally present in Basque political culture have been transformed from an idealistic commitment born of resistance to authoritarianism, to (2) a more pragmatic, transactional engagement increasingly defined by immediate effectiveness and individual outcomes. In our view, this shift is caused by the interplay between historical nationalist movements, generational experiences, and broader global trends (3). Our research thus reveals a nuanced landscape where (4) democratic loyalty is being continually negotiated, challenged, and redefined.

1. Democratic traditions in the Basque Country

In the 1970s and 1980s, one of the most Basque popular songs explicitly encouraged “throwing democracy into the trash” if the emerging political system did not allow Basque to be spoken in the Basque Country (*Euskal Herrian euskaraz/ hitz egiterik ez bada/ bota dezagun demokrazia/ zerri askara*). This represents a more archaic form of transactional relationship with democracy, albeit tied to the requirement for democracy to protect the community’s identity and most basic rights: “we are not going to let our soul die”, as the song goes on (*geure arima hiltzen uzteko/ bezain odolgalduak ez gara*). If democracy cannot protect these rights, it is not democracy —it is useless and redundant.

The popularity of this song reflects that the democratic tradition in the Basque Country has been shaped by a complex interaction of political and social forces, particularly two fundamental currents within the Basque nationalist movement: the *Jeltzale* space, represented mainly by the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), and the left-wing Basque nationalist space.

The PNV, founded in 1895, has consistently maintained a commitment to democratic principles. It has defended the idea of a Basque democracy, opposing various forms of authoritarianism, both external (e.g., the Franco dictatorship) and internal (e.g., revolution-

ary trends within Basque nationalism). This vision has been crucial in shaping the Basque democratic ideology, aiming for greater autonomy while respecting democratic institutions.

On the other hand, the left-wing Basque nationalists have historically maintained a more complex and skeptical relationship with democracy. This skepticism has been grounded in factors like the association of democracy with the Spanish political system, criticism of liberal democracy as a mechanism serving economic interests, and the belief that the Spanish democratic framework did not allow for the self-determination of the Basque people. However, a significant shift occurred in 1995 with the *Alternatiba Demokratikoa* proposal, marking a paradigm shift in the left-wing Basque nationalist strategy and embracing democratic means to resolve the Basque conflict.

A third important space for governance in the Basque Country is the Spanish left, particularly the PSE-PSOE. The Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party has defended democratic values throughout its history, from its anti-Francoist resistance to its post-transition stance against ETA. However, it has framed this defense within the limits of the Spanish Constitution and the integrity of the state, leading to tensions regarding issues like referendums for self-determination.

2. From idealism to pragmatism

The consolidation of a democratic culture in Basque society also presents a significant historical and generational paradox. Older generations, with vivid memories of Francoism, maintain a strong rejection of authoritarianism, anchoring their democratic commitment in opposition to past oppressive experiences. Meanwhile, the evolution of leftist movements toward institutional frameworks represents a crucial pragmatic shift. This move involved abandoning more abstract revolutionary ideals in favor of political praxis within existing democratic structures. While this transition was positively perceived by Basque society, it marked a movement from idealism to pragmatism in its conception of democracy.

However, this transition has not been without its tensions and contradictions. For some, pragmatism signifies a necessary compromise, allowing for tangible progress within a flawed system. For others, it signals a dilution of democracy, reducing it to a superficial mechanism that lacks genuine participatory depth.

This critique highlights the risk of disengagement and disillusionment, particularly if pragmatism is perceived as prioritizing institutional stability over meaningful public involvement. These conflicting perspectives underscore an ongoing struggle within Basque society to balance democratic ideals with practical governance, raising questions about how to sustain a participatory and inclusive democratic culture in the face of evolving social and political realities.

Our qualitative dataset reveals a new emerging trend, particularly among younger generations, which deepens and transforms this pragmatism. This new perspective does not see democracy as an intrinsically valuable ideal, but as a *system* that must prove its worth through *tangible* results and solutions to individual and collective problems. This transactional view of democracy among some younger Basques reflects a more individualistic and results-oriented pragmatism. This transformation points to a profound shift in the nature of the democratic social contract, where legitimacy increasingly depends on perceived performance.

3. Global trends

The rise of this underground current, which sees democracy in a more individualistic and transactional way, is not a merely local or entirely surprising finding. On the contrary, it reflects an expected trend when considering the deeper cultural dynamics of our Western societies, such as the constant “acceleration” of political times (Rosa, 2010) and the “economization” of politics (Brown, 2015).

The acceleration of political times, characterized by the constant and rapid flow of information and events, seems to be significantly reconfiguring the way citizens form and adjust their attitudes toward the democratic system. This observation aligns with the “social acceleration” theories proposed by sociologists like Hartmut Rosa, now applied to the specific realm of political and democratic attitudes. In this context of informational and political immediacy, there is a *temporal compression* in the way citizens evaluate the democratic system. The dominance of short-term considerations in forming political judgments means that perceptions of immediate effectiveness gain disproportionate weight in shaping not only democratic satisfaction but also traditionally more stable dimensions like legitimacy and emotional attachment to the system.

According to Rosa (2010), several interconnected factors explain this dynamic:

1. *Information overload*: The constant flow of political news and events makes it difficult to form long-term narratives, favoring evaluations based on immediate impressions and short-term outcomes.
2. *Difficulty in projecting the future*: In a political environment perceived as increasingly volatile and unpredictable, the citizens’ capacity and willingness to base their judgments on long-term considerations are diminished.
3. *Immediacy of expectations*: The culture of instant gratification, bolstered by digital technologies, spills over into the political realm, generating expectations for immediate responses and results from the democratic system.
4. *Erosion of historical narratives*: The acceleration of political time may be weakening the connection to broader historical narratives that traditionally supported the legitimacy and attachment to democracy.

This temporal compression results in a stronger correlation between short-term perceived effectiveness and all dimensions of democratic attitudes. Legitimacy and emotional attachment to the democratic system, which once could withstand temporary fluctuations, now appear more susceptible to being recalibrated based on perceptions of immediate effectiveness.

Rosa’s notion of the acceleration of political times offers an explanatory framework for the convergence observed between perceived effectiveness and various dimensions of democratic attitudes. It suggests that we are witnessing a fundamental transformation in how citizens, especially younger generations, relate to and evaluate the democratic system. This presents significant challenges for the long-term stability and depth of democratic commitment.

Bernard Manin’s “audience democracy” framework (Manin, 1995) also contextualizes the transactional view of democracy. Manin’s model illuminates how contemporary democracies increasingly function as marketplaces of attention and reaction, where transactional exchanges supplant sustained ideological alignment. This perspective, characterized by short-term exchanges between voters and politicians, manifests through three key mechanisms: the prioritization of visibility and relatability over substantive policy; frag-

mented accountability where representatives focus on responsive signaling rather than long-term delivery; and eroding institutional trust resulting in political loyalty based on immediate gratification.

Recent data from the Centre for the Future of Democracy reveals steep declines in democratic satisfaction among 18–34-year-olds globally (Foa *et al.*, 2020), while European Election Studies show youth voter abstention exceeding 70% in some EU regions (Dezelan, 2023). The heterogeneity in youth attitudes toward democracy—particularly the concerning openness to authoritarian alternatives among some segments—further exemplifies the shift toward a marketplace model of politics where performance trumps substance (Fernández, 2024). Notably, while young people increasingly reject institutional participation, they embrace alternative, often digital forms of engagement that emphasize direct, issue-based interaction, reinforcing Manin’s observation that contemporary democracies function primarily through transactional exchanges rather than enduring party loyalties.

Our findings also resonate significantly with notions presented by Wendy Brown in her influential work *Undoing the Demos* (2015). Brown argues that neoliberal dominance has quietly eroded the foundations of democracy, transforming all aspects of life, including politics, into transactional relationships. This “economization” of the public sphere has led to a reconfiguration of citizenship as market actors and democracy as a system that must “perform” and “deliver” in economic-financial terms.

Brown highlights this shift through her analysis of public higher education, an institution historically committed to egalitarianism and preparing citizens for democratic engagement. In its neoliberal reconfiguration, education becomes a site for producing human capital rather than cultivating informed, critical citizens. This transformation mirrors the broader neoliberal redefinition of democracy as a transactional system, where the depth and richness of democratic participation are subordinated to the imperatives of market logic. Tellingly, the term appears in *Undoing the Demos* once, in the context of diminishing academic freedom to safeguard “transactions and relations between the university and state legislators” (Brown, 2015, p. 262).

In our focus groups, we have observed manifestations of this trend, particularly among younger par-

ticipants. The increasingly transactional view of democracy detected, where legitimacy and attachment to the democratic system seem to depend more on the immediate results it can provide, reflects Brown’s concern about the commercialization of democratic values. This trend suggests a subtle but significant shift from seeing democracy as an intrinsic good to viewing it as a more utilitarian and outcome-oriented system. Such an evolution raises profound questions about the long-term sustainability of democratic values in a context where success is increasingly measured in terms of economic efficiency, competitive advantage, constant capital accumulation, and immediate individual satisfaction, rather than the common good and civic participation.

The convergence of Rosa’s theory of acceleration and Brown’s critique of neoliberalism helps explain how both the form and substance of democracy are being reshaped by broader cultural shifts in society. In this light, the transactional tendencies we observe are not isolated to the Basque Country but part of a global pattern where democracy is increasingly evaluated based on its utility and immediate performance rather than its intrinsic values or long-term collective benefits.

4. Testing democratic loyalty beyond satisfaction

The findings of our study reveal a complex and potentially paradoxical dynamic in the democratic attitudes of the population. On the one hand, quantitative data show a positive trend in democratic satisfaction, strongly correlated with the perceived effectiveness of the democratic system (Arantzazulab, 2023; Eizagirre and Baztan, 2024a). This correlation suggests that as citizens rate the performance of politics, the economy, and public services in the Basque Country more positively compared to the broader Spanish context, there is a proportional increase in democratic satisfaction levels (Eizagirre and Baztan, 2024b). However, our qualitative analysis shows an underlying trend that could have significant implications for long-term democratic stability. The correlation between perceived effectiveness and democratic attitudes is not limited solely to satisfaction; it is increasingly extending to legitimacy and affection toward the democratic system. This challenges traditional theoretical models that have viewed these latter dimensions as relatively stable and resistant to short-term fluctuations in perceived effectiveness.

The convergence of these two trends presents a complex scenario. While the increase in democratic satisfaction might be interpreted as a positive indicator of Basque democratic health, the growing linkage between legitimacy and democratic affection with perceived outcomes (both political and economic) suggests a potential fragility in the system. This dynamic implies that the support base for democracy in the Basque Country may be becoming more contingent and pragmatic, thus more susceptible and vulnerable to quick variations in the perceived performance of the system.

Consequently, while current indicators of democratic satisfaction show a positive trend, there is an underlying risk that the legitimacy of the system and the emotional attachment to democracy are becoming increasingly dependent on short-term outcomes. This shift toward a more transactional view of democracy could undermine the system's resilience in the face of crises or periods of perceived underperformance, posing significant challenges for long-term democratic stability in the Basque context.

This duality in the observed trends in the Basque Country presents a potential vulnerability for the democratic system. The current positive correlation between perceived effectiveness and democratic satisfaction, although seemingly favorable, masks a deeper underlying risk. The growing linkage of all dimensions of the political culture —satisfaction, legitimacy, and affection— with the perception of effectiveness creates a potentially unstable foundation for long-term democratic support. The danger lies in the volatile nature of public perceptions of government effectiveness and economic performance. During times of economic crisis, political instability, or significant social challenges, the perception of democratic effectiveness is likely to deteriorate.

In a context where legitimacy and affection for democracy are increasingly tied to this perception of effectiveness, a decline in democratic satisfaction may not be limited to mere temporary dissatisfaction. Instead, a decline in the perceived effectiveness of democracy risks setting off a domino effect: it can reduce citizens' satisfaction, undermine the legitimacy of the democratic system, and weaken the emotional attachment of Basque citizens to core democratic values. This scenario could create fertile ground for the emergence of authoritarian movements or ideologies, which are currently absent from the political land-

scape of the Basque Country but might be underlying the surface of public discourse. This is consistent with another study commissioned by Arantzazulab, which portrays young Basques as increasingly detached from the democratic process, with many viewing electoral campaigns as wasteful, corrupt, and disconnected from their realities. Unlike older generations, they lack a historical memory of democracy as a hard-won achievement, seeing it instead as a given. This disconnect is intensified by declining trust in political institutions and the limited effectiveness of digital tools and social networks in delivering meaningful electoral information. With fewer young people convinced of the value of their vote, and one-third deciding in the final two weeks of campaigns, the absence of compelling electoral engagement reflects a deeper crisis in democratic legitimacy and participation (Arantzazulab & DOT, 2024).

Our analysis indicates the need to reconsider the established theoretical framework on democratic attitudes, which has traditionally separated democratic satisfaction (more volatile and linked to perceived effectiveness) from legitimacy and affection (considered more stable). In particular, the findings of our study point to a trend that challenges two key concepts proposed by Pippa Norris in her analysis of democratic attitudes, critical citizenship and democratic resilience. Norris (2011) argues that an increase in critical citizens —those who maintain strong support for democratic principles while being skeptical about their current implementation— can be beneficial to democracy by driving necessary reforms. She also asserts that established democracies show resilience, maintaining sustained support for fundamental democratic principles even during times of dissatisfaction with the specific performance of the system. However, our results suggest a concerning evolution that contrasts with these propositions. We have observed an increasing focus on the “specific” aspects of democracy, i.e., its concrete outcomes and perceived effectiveness, at the expense of “diffuse” support for fundamental democratic principles.

These phenomena suggest a decline in critical citizenship as defined by Norris. Rather than citizens maintaining a strong commitment to democratic ideals while constructively criticizing their implementation, we are seeing a population whose support for democracy is increasingly contingent on the immediate and tangible results of the system. The implications

of this trend for democratic resilience are significant. As diffuse support for democracy as an ideal weakens, so does the potential for the Basque democracy to withstand periods of perceived underperformance or short-term crises. Democratic resilience, which Norris argues is based on sustained support for fundamental principles even in times of dissatisfaction with specific performance, could erode if support for the system becomes excessively dependent on short-term outcomes.

Conclusions

The focus group data reveals a nuanced evolution in the political culture of the Basque Country, characterized by an emerging generational paradox. This shift reflects a transition from a values-based attachment to democracy toward a more performance-oriented and transactional perspective, particularly among younger generations. This general conclusion can be developed in at least five different yet complementary directions, suggesting lines of further research.

1. Correlation between effectiveness and democratic satisfaction

The data highlights a correlation between the perceived effectiveness of democracy —measured through policies, economic performance, and public services— and democratic satisfaction. Both young and older adults express dissatisfaction with the current democratic system, albeit for different reasons. Young adults focus on immediate, tangible outcomes such as healthcare, education, housing and environmental issues, tying their engagement closely to these priorities. Meanwhile, older generations exhibit a broader critique of structural inefficiencies but still maintain an appreciation for the historical progress represented by democracy, even amid its limitations.

2. Erosion of legitimacy and emotional affection

Qualitative insights suggest that perceptions of ineffectiveness in democratic governance are beginning to erode both legitimacy and emotional attachment to the democratic system. This erosion is more pronounced among younger populations, whose pragmatic approach contrasts sharply with the older gener-

ations' historically rooted commitment to democracy. For young adults, democracy's legitimacy is contingent on its ability to deliver concrete, immediate benefits. In contrast, older generations frame their support for democracy as a safeguard against authoritarianism, emphasizing its intrinsic value rather than short-term performance.

3. Generational differences in democratic perception

The generational divide presents a key dimension of this evolving political culture. Older Basque citizens, shaped by their experiences under the Franco regime, view democracy as an intrinsic good and a symbol of progress and freedom. Their attachment to democratic values is underpinned by historical memory, loyalty to democratic principles, and a rejection of authoritarian alternatives. Conversely, younger Basques demonstrate a more conditional view of democracy. For them, democracy is not inherently better, but a mechanism for achieving practical outcomes. Their selective and issue-specific engagement reflects a shift from idealism toward pragmatism, as their relationship with democracy is shaped by its perceived ability to address contemporary challenges.

4. Broader implications of the generational paradox

The interplay between these generational perspectives signals a weakening of what Norris identifies as stable attitudes toward democracy —namely, legitimacy and emotional attachment. While older generations anchor their democratic commitment in historical narratives, younger generations prioritize results, fostering a more transactional approach. This trend is not inherently negative; democratic satisfaction often increases in favorable socio-political contexts. However, the growing emphasis on performance over principles could undermine the stability of democracy in the long term.

The Basque democratic experience reflects broader societal transformations. The political realignments following the Basque conflict, particularly the left-wing nationalist shift toward democratic engagement, exemplify the tension between ideological idealism and pragmatic political practice. Today, this tension persists, with older generations upholding democracy as a timeless ideal and younger generations evaluating it through a lens of practical outcomes.

This transactional shift is new in the literature but has profound implications. As younger citizens increasingly frame democracy as a performance-based system, the social contract itself is evolving. Political legitimacy risks becoming contingent on the system's effectiveness in addressing immediate needs, potentially sidelining its foundational principles. This redefinition of democracy, while reflecting contemporary political realities, underscores the need for caution in navigating these cultural shifts to ensure that the democratic tradition remains resilient and adaptable in the face of generational change.

5. Social impact

While more research is needed to fully understand the scope and depth of this trend, the findings of this study suggest that the emergence of a more transactional view of democracy—particularly among younger generations—calls for a careful reflection on its implications for social wellbeing. In the Basque Country, where democratic engagement has traditionally been intertwined with collective identity and historical resistance to authoritarianism, this shift suggests a deeper transformation in the social contract. Legitimacy and participation are increasingly anchored in the perceived effectiveness of institutions rather than in normative or ideological commitment. This reconfiguration may reflect growing disillusionment, but it also signals a citizenry that expects more concrete outcomes from democratic governance.

While this trend presents real challenges—such as the risk of disengagement and weakening of social cohesion if expectations are unmet—it also holds the potential to stimulate more responsive and accountable institutions. Citizens demanding meaningful, results-oriented democracy can contribute to broader efforts to revitalize political participation and collaborative governance. In this sense, our conclusions are closely aligned with several Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). Even SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) is indirectly implicated, as inclusive, responsive democracies foster psychological security and civic empowerment. Ultimately, understanding and addressing the rise of transactional attitudes is crucial not only for preserving democratic integrity but also for advancing broader agendas of justice, equity, and wellbeing.

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Authorship and contributions

The Arantzazulab collaborative research space co-designed the study on conceptions of democracy. AC and LC facilitated the focus groups, with occasional support from Gaia I+C. ET developed the main hypothesis and authored the initial draft. LC was responsible for transcribing and tabulating the data. IA, LA, and EG reviewed multiple drafts, offering feedback and contributing secondary literature. AC reviewed the survey data, revised the final draft, and facilitated connections with Arantzazulab, which hosted several sense-making sessions. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

English translations of the quotes from Table 2

1. "I think we don't live in a democracy because voting every four years and, moreover, here we vote for one party, then that party makes a pact with another 'with the devil for whatever reason,' so yes we vote but our opinion, I don't know, honestly, if things move forward, because we vote for one party and then that party does exactly the opposite by making a pact with a party with opposing ideas to prevent their contrary ideas from succeeding."
2. "I think democracy is a bit hermetic, very hermetic, right? Participation is only channeled to voting every 4 years and there's no other interaction with citizens, right?"
3. "I don't trust institutions, because institutions in the end, well... there's a head, a person, and that's it, they do what that person says and if you don't do that, you're out."
4. "I'm not, I don't participate in politics, associations, or unions... I'm not participating in anything, and well."
5. "I think at the State level yes, a change has been noticed over the years, we were stuck in that bipartisanship, (...) those who governed, and at this moment there are other political parties involved in that game as well. That bipartisanship has been broken, which we've had for years at the State level. In the Basque Autonomous Community, well, we've always had the same thing and I don't know. I'm quite critical, eh, with the Basque Autonomous Community and with democracy in general. I see it as very hermetic."
6. "I think the more people, the more parties understand each other on a specific issue, the better."
7. "I think at the local level you first start with what's closest to home, that at the Spanish level, eh, this struggle they're having now..."
8. "I have mainly focused on the situation here, I think the sociopolitical situation in the Basque Country is an evolution with small changes in recent years, but well, I see a similar situation, right?"
9. "I think, yes, democracy, yes, is the most appropriate way. I think so, and well, what definition do I have? Well, in my time at school they taught that democracy is when citizens choose who governs (...) with that concept. In the end, what we have at home now, well, we vote but the Basque Autonomous Community is... I think like in Spain, we are in a democracy. And well, it could be improved, because of course what happens."
10. "In the end, we vote every four years for lists that political parties give us. Either this one or that one. I think, for example, in small neighborhoods to get their representative, I think it's one, well it's a small town, it has five neighborhoods and each neighborhood votes for who should represent them among themselves, and then among themselves it's decided who should go to the town hall to vote from that town."
11. "I think in a good democracy that couldn't happen."
12. "I think democracy should ultimately be a political system based on equality, and from that perspective, as I said before, I am somewhat critical of democracy, right?"

13. "I want to believe so, I can't imagine society in a dictatorship or communism. I want to believe so."
14. "I think democracy is a good political model but I see that there have been great deficiencies there, there have been cases of corruption and that has created tremendous anger among citizens, right? And dis-
- trust, lack of trust, right? And so I think it's also very important to strengthen that citizen participation, that culture."
15. "I believe that yes, democracy is the most appropriate way to govern. At least I don't have anything else in mind, there isn't anything else."