



Article

Democracy, Free Elections, and Gender Equality as Perceived by Recent Immigrants

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Abstract: This study examines how democracy and its political attributes (such as free elections) and social attributes (such as gender equality) are perceived by people who come from nondemocratic countries and have lived for several months in a democratic society. The data were collected in Quebec using an original questionnaire completed by 127 adult immigrants. The results indicate that recent immigrants from nondemocratic countries primarily view democracy as a society based on the rule of law with strong social control. They consider free elections significantly more important to democracy than the possibility to vote for any political party. Contrary to expectations, recent immigrants view gender equality as essential for democracy, although this importance varies according to sphere. Immigrants' conceptions of democracy also signify the most salient characteristics of the social and physical environment of the host society as the most important democratic features. The study illustrates the multifaceted nature of the process of forming ideas about democracy among immigrants socialized in nondemocratic societies. Not only is theoretical knowledge about democracy as a political system part of these ideas, but everything observed in a democratic society can be perceived as attributes of democracy. The results indicate that immigrants' impressions of the social and physical environment in their host society should not be overlooked when analyzing their ideas on democracy. Consequently, the study concludes that a more welcoming society can foster more positive visions of democracy among newcomers from nondemocratic countries.

Keywords: attitudes towards gender equality; perceptions of democracy; Quebec; social control; the rule of law



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1. Introduction

In the modern world, many democratic countries welcome immigrants from less democratized countries. It is not surprising, then, that the visions of democracy and its essential attributes held by immigrants are of research interest. Immigrants arriving in a democratic society are expected to support democracy and contribute to its prosperity. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend what they are expected to support and contribute to prosperity from their own perspective. Even if individuals assert their support for democracy, the specifics of their conceptions of democracy may result in different expectations and evaluations (Landwehr and Steiner 2017) and the ways in which people understand democracy count for democratic consolidation by changing their orientation towards democracy (Cho 2015). Moreover, the way people define democracy affects their satisfaction with it (Crow 2010; Miller et al. 1997; Kornberg and Clarke 1994), which in turn has a significant impact on political behavior (Crow 2010). Consequently, effective democratic orientations alone, without understanding what is meant by democracy, do not provide an accurate and complete account of the contours and dynamics of democratic development (Cho 2015).

Immigrants' visions of democracy are of particular interest as they represent the perspectives of individuals often socialized in nondemocratic countries. In Quebec, for example, according to the Ministry of Immigration, in 2023 at least half of the immigrants came from countries, such as China, Iran, and North and Central African nations (Immigrants Selon

[Le Pays de Naissance, Québec, 2019–2023 2024](#)). They are expected, however, to support democracy in the democratic country that welcomes them. The democratic orientations of immigrants are important because they constitute, at least in Canada, a considerable proportion of the population. According to Statistics Canada, the proportion of immigrants in the population has increased recently in all regions, constituting from 5% to 45% of the population, depending on the year and the province ([Houle et al. 2017](#)).

In the case of immigrants, it is also essential to understand how their perceptions of democracy and its fundamental attributes are influenced and shaped by their experiences in the host society, as the host society for many of them presents the very first life experience of knowing democracy. The supposition that some immigrants may have their very first experience of democracy in the host society is based on the author's observations of recent immigrants in linguistic integration classes. Indeed, all the participants in this study, as described below in the methodology section, according to their own words, came to Canada directly from their countries of origin. Consequently, the results of this study are applicable to immigrants who acquired their first experience of living in a democratic society in their host country. This study, therefore, examines immigrants' visions of democracy and its attributes, and how they are influenced by their experiences in the host society.

While examining the political ideas or attitudes of immigrants, previous studies have focused on immigrant support for democracy as a form of government ([Eskelinen and Verkuyten 2020](#)) or trust in the country's Parliament and satisfaction with the national government ([Maxwell 2010](#)), or support for the democratic system (i.e., seeing it as good or bad) and democratic rights (i.e., agreeing or disagreeing with statements about religious freedoms and freedom of speech and associations) ([Gundelach 2010](#)). Other studies have explored immigrant party attachment in their host countries ([Bergh and Bjørklund 2011](#); [Just 2019](#)), their interest in election campaigns and political partisanship ([Barker and McMillan 2017](#); [White et al. 2008](#)), and political ([Nakhaie 2008](#); [Black 1987](#)) and electoral participation in the host country ([Chaudhary 2018](#); [De Rooij 2012](#); [Bueker 2005](#); [Wass et al. 2015](#); [White 2017](#); [Voicu and Comşa 2014](#); [Finn 2020](#)). However, the question of what immigrants understand by democracy and one of its undeniable attributes, free elections, is underdeveloped in the research literature, although this question is fundamental to analyzing the underlying motivations for the political behavior of immigrants. This study aims to analyze how recent immigrants view democracy and free elections and how their experience in the host society may affect their visions of democracy. Furthermore, this study contributes to the analysis of the perception of democracy by people socialized in nondemocratic countries.

Perceptions of democracy among people socialized in nondemocratic societies are usually analyzed using data collected from nondemocratic citizens who have never lived in a democratic society ([Dalton et al. 2007](#); [Pickel et al. 2016](#); [de Regt 2013](#); [Zagrebinina 2020b](#); [Teti et al. 2019](#)). Unlike previous studies, this research examines the perception of democracy by people socialized in nondemocratic societies but with experience of several months of life in a democratic society. This provides the opportunity to achieve two objectives: to reveal which characteristics of a modern democratic society are most striking to newcomers, and to test whether the experiences of several months living in a democratic society provide newcomers with an adequate idea of the political functioning of a democratic society.

To analyze immigrants' perceptions of democracy, this study uses data collected through original formalized questionnaires. The data were collected in Quebec, one of the ten Canadian provinces that welcomes thousands of immigrants from less democratized countries every year and is 'now becoming a bona fide immigrant society' ([Blad and Couton 2009](#)). The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, the study examines democracy as a concept and as a host society and develops the research hypotheses. Next, the methodology, including data, concept measurement, and methods, is presented. Then, the main findings are presented and interpreted, followed by a conclusion.

2. Democracy as a Concept and a Host Society

Democracy is a well-known notion in different countries, whether less democratized or more democratized, and even in oppressive regimes. When the World Values Survey asked people in over 70 countries about the importance of democracy and its attributes, they received responses, indicating that people in all these countries are aware of this notion and, moreover, have their own opinions on it. However, their opinions vary according to socio-political context, whether less democratized or more democratized (Cho 2015; Dalton et al. 2007; Zagrebina 2020b). While in the modern world, thanks to the media, many people in different countries are exposed to discussions about democracy, this exposure does not guarantee a uniform understanding of it. Empirical studies show that even when the media discuss democracy, the term can represent very different things in various countries. Consequently, instead of spreading standardized information about liberal democracy, the media, as the main source of information on the topic, often legitimize any regime as democratic (Dahlberg and Mörkenstam 2024). Thus, mere exposure to ideas of democracy does not mean that the same ideas are being spread in different countries. The data from the World Values Survey show that people living in established democracies, who know about democracy not only from the media but also from lived experience, see democracy primarily as a habitat and a quality of the social environment. In contrast, for people living in regimes without democratic experience or limited exposure to it, democracy is an abstract concept known from the media and an ideal of a political regime that encompasses the most cherished expectations, such as economic prosperity and the rule of law (Zagrebina 2020b).

One of the fundamental and indispensable attributes of modern democracy is free elections (Huber et al. 1997; Dunn and Singh 2014; Coppedge et al. 2011; Cheibub et al. 2010; Lijphart 2011; Lindberg et al. 2014; Munck 2014). Even people under oppressive regimes are well aware of this (Cooley 2015; Canache 2012; Luo 2018; de Regt 2013; Teti et al. 2019; Shin and Cho 2010; Mattes and Bratton 2007). This study aims to explore recent immigrants' perceptions of free elections. To examine their understanding of how free elections work, this study tests the hypothesis that free elections and its undeniable components, such as equal opportunities between the sexes to become a political leader and the possibility to vote for any political party, may not be considered equally essential for democracy by recent immigrants. Free elections, unlike gender equality in politics and multiple political parties, are a better-known and more pronounced concept, even in oppressive regimes, and are therefore not necessarily associated with the other two. Consequently, free elections are expected to be considered the most essential aspect of democracy (Hypothesis 1).

Previous studies have shown that, in democratic societies, people are more likely to accept gender equality than those in nondemocratic societies (Ciftci 2010; Inglehart et al. 2002; Inglehart and Norris 2003), that nondemocratic societies are more traditional (Inglehart and Oyserman 2004; Triandis 2001) where the social roles of men and women are defined more strictly, that attitudes towards gender equality are more egalitarian in more democratized countries than in less democratized countries (Zagrebina 2020a), and that democratic citizens are more likely to associate democracy with gender equality than people in less democratized countries (de Regt 2013; Zagrebina 2020b). Based on these previous results, this study assumes that recent immigrants, i.e., individuals socialized in societies more traditional than their host society, view gender equality as a non-essential democratic attribute (Hypothesis 2). To make the analysis more accurate, the study translates an abstract concept of gender equality, which is familiar to everyone but is unclear in meaning for different people, into several statements about more palpable things. The study uses statements about the opportunities and rights of men and women in different spheres (discussed below) because, even in democratic societies, support for gender equality varies depending on the spheres where this equality is supposed to be respected (Zagrebina 2020a).

Economic prosperity and strong social control have been identified in previous research as associated with democracy among people in nondemocratic countries (Zagrebina 2020b). This study, therefore, assumes that recent immigrants from nondemocratic countries view

elements related to a thriving economy as very essential for democracy (Hypothesis 3). The manifestations of social control are also presumed to be crucial for democracy from the perspective of recent immigrants (Hypothesis 4).

Adult immigrants who have arrived in a democratic society from less democratized countries and who have spent several months in their host society have a unique opportunity. Being socialized in societies less democratized than their host society, they, unlike their counterparts still living in home societies, acquired ideas about democracy as a habitat, not just as an abstract concept. Consequently, they have an exceptional occasion to develop a vision of democracy that differs both from the visions of people without experience of life in a democratic society and of people socialized in a democratic society. This study hypothesizes that recent immigrants' view of democracy in a host democratic society might combine their most striking impressions of the host society with their previously developed ideas about democracy as a concept. Since the most powerful impressions of the host society that newcomers can receive in the first few months are those that people usually have during their daily activities, the study assumes that these impressions are primarily related to infrastructure and public goods. Thus, the study assumes that public goods accessible to all should be seen as essential democratic attributes by recent immigrants (Hypothesis 5).

Finally, the study hypothesizes about the least and most valued attributes of democracy, as assessed by recent immigrants. Based on previous results (Dalton et al. 2007; Pickel et al. 2016; de Regt 2013; Zagrebina 2020b), it assumes that free elections should be assessed as the most essential democratic attribute, followed by factors related to a prosperous economy, including infrastructure and public goods, then by the rule of law and social control. All these attributes should be considered more essential for democracy than gender equality (Hypothesis 6).

3. Methodology

3.1. Data, Participants, and Procedure of Data Collection

The data for this research were collected in Montreal in 2019 using an original formalized questionnaire discussed below. The questionnaire was completed by 127 adult immigrants (39% (50) men and 61% (77) women) aged 25 to 45, who were students of a linguistic integration program, randomly assigned to several groups by the Ministry of Immigration, Francisation and Integration. The participants came mainly from Arab countries (such as Syria, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon, and Algeria), Iran, and from Asia (China, the Philippines, India, and others). Thus, all participants came from countries less democratized than Canada (according to the democracy indices: (Kekic 2007; Lindberg et al. 2014)). All of them, according to their own words, came to Canada directly from their countries of origin, which leads to the supposition that their first experience living in a democratic society was acquired in their host country. Most of them spent 3 to 12 months in Quebec, i.e., in an advanced democratic society (compared to their society of origin according to the democracy indices).

The completion of the questionnaires was part of an educational process in the integration program. It was preceded by a detailed explanation of the topic, a confirmation of the research anonymity, and a statement for educational and academic research purposes only, followed by an exchange of opinions on research topics and more detailed explanations of concepts analyzed in the study. All students present in their classes at the time of data collection were invited to complete the anonymized questionnaire. They were explained that by returning their completed questionnaires, they agreed to participate in the study. Those who did not wish to participate could either not return their questionnaires or answer 'don't know' to all the questions without declaring their disagreement to participate in front of others. Only one questionnaire was completed with all 'don't know' responses, and according to the number of students and the number of questionnaires returned, none of them refused to return the completed questionnaire.

3.2. Measuring the Perception of Democracy

The measure of the perception of democracy was designed to test the research hypotheses. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items—attributes of democracy, and for each of them, respondents should check whether this attribute is important for democracy on a scale of 1 (not important) to 4 (very important); the answer ‘don’t know’ was considered 0. The study considered the ‘don’t know’ answers because it assumed that such an answer indicates that the item is not an important part of the respondent’s worldview. This questionnaire was inspired by the questionnaire developed by the World Values Survey (Welzel and Alvarez 2014). However, it has been significantly modified based on preliminary discussions with potential respondents who did not participate in the subsequent survey to make the topics of the questions more specific and more palpable to respondents and to allow the testing of research hypotheses. Abstract items like “the economy is prospering” and “women have the same rights as men” used by the World Values Survey have been transformed into questions about more palpable things in everyday life, and the question of free elections of political leaders was broadened into three. This study also added original questions on the rule of law and social control, as well as some “noise” questions to dilute the questionnaire and avoid focusing on political elements. The 20 items of the questionnaire cover five topics: 1. **Free elections** (people choose their political leaders in free elections; in elections, all citizens can vote for any political party; men and women have equal opportunities to become political leaders); 2. **Gender equality** (men and women are equal before the law; men and women have equal opportunities to become political leaders; men and women can obtain the same jobs; men and women have equal rights to study at university; men and women have the same right to open a private business; at school, boys and girls have the same duties (homework) and the same rights; in the family, men and women have the same obligations); 3. **Economic prosperity and public goods** (there are many supermarkets and many products to buy; public libraries and public pools are available to all; university education is free; salaries for all employees are high). The abundance of supermarkets is a tangible aspect of everyday life, reflecting the availability of material goods. These, along with public libraries, public pools, and other services, represent the resources available in society; 4. **Order of law and strong social control** (everyone respects the laws; men and women are equal before the law; all political leaders must respect the laws; school education is compulsory for all; parents must take care of their children); 5. **“Noise” elements** have been added to dilute the questionnaire (at the supermarket, you can buy products from all over the world; nature is protected; pets are always supervised by owners). The choice of public goods and “noise” elements was not random. It was based on preliminary discussions of what is valued most in the host society with potential respondents (other language course students) who did not participate in the subsequent study. In the preliminary discussions, one element of the order of law topic was also mentioned among the most valued things in the host society: everyone respects the laws.

3.3. Methods

This study uses a quantitative survey design. Although ordinal scales were used, these scales considered continuous variables (0 to 4) where a higher value corresponds to a greater agreement with the importance of an item. Therefore, first, it calculated the means (averages) for all the elements of the questionnaire and then ranked them in hierarchical order. Then, a paired samples two-tailed t-test for means was performed to examine if the means were statistically different.

4. Findings

The results show that all the items included in the questionnaire were considered by the participants to be very essential for democracy, although to varying degrees (Table 1). Even the items included just to dilute the questionnaire, such as “at the supermarket, you can buy products from all over the world”, “nature is protected”, and “pets are always

supervised by owners”, were deemed very important for democracy. This may be explained by the pressure of the situation, the effect observed by social psychologists (Moskowitz 2005). Participants might believe that all the items included were important for democracy, as they would not be included otherwise. They could also indicate the perceived importance of certain elements without necessarily relating them to democracy. However, even if all the items were marked as very important, there is a significant difference in their importance, enabling a comparison of how participants perceived their significance for democracy.

Table 1. Responses to the question ‘What is important for democracy?’.

Ranking	Parameter	Mean (Std. Deviation)
1	Everyone respects the laws	3.816 (0.389)
2	All political leaders must respect the laws	3.794 (0.406)
3	<i>Men and women have equal rights to study at university</i>	3.770 (0.476)
4	Parents must take care of their children	3.744 (0.474)
5	<i>Men and women are equal before the law</i>	3.709 (0.592)
6	University education is free	3.659 (0.683)
7	Nature is protected	3.651 (0.584)
8	School education is compulsory for all	3.648 (0.651)
9	<i>At school, boys and girls have the same duties (homework) and the same rights</i>	3.603 (0.728)
10	<i>Men and women have the same right to open a private business</i>	3.552 (0.615)
11	<i>Men and women can get the same jobs</i>	3.551 (0.794)
12	People choose their political leaders in free elections	3.545 (0.889)
13	Public libraries and public pools are available to all	3.532 (0.656)
14	<i>Men and women have equal opportunities to become political leaders</i>	3.504 (0.809)
15	<i>In the family, men and women have the same obligations</i>	3.437 (0.775)
16	Pets are always supervised by owners	3.312 (0.856)
17	In elections, all citizens can vote for any political party	3.240 (1.169)
18	Salaries for all employees are high	3.175 (0.958)
19	There are many supermarkets and many products to buy	3.160 (0.962)
20	At the supermarket, you can buy products from all over the world	3.127 (0.980)

The study’s **first hypothesis**, suggesting that free elections should be considered more essential for democracy than gender equality in politics and the possibility of voting for any political party, has been partially confirmed. The statement that people choose their political leaders in free elections is seen as very essential for democracy. However, contrary to expectations, the statement that men and women have equal opportunities to become political leaders is considered as important to democracy as free elections. Only the assertion that in elections all citizens can vote for any political party is considered significantly less essential than free elections (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 2. Results of paired samples t-test: importance of free elections for democracy.

Question	Mean (Std. Deviation)	t	p-Value (2-Tailed)
• People chose their leaders in free elections	3.554 (0.894)	0.232	0.817
• Men and women have equal opportunities to become political leaders	3.537 (0.753)		
• Men and women have equal opportunities to become political leaders	3.513 (0.822)	2.540	0.012
• In elections, all citizens can vote for any political party	3.244 (1.179)		
• People chose their leaders in free elections	3.559 (0.892)	3.213	0.002
• In elections, all citizens can vote for any political party	3.229 (1.180)		

Note: The p-value < 0.05 indicates a statistically significant difference between the two compared means.

The difference in the evaluation of the importance of “free elections” and “voting for any political party” in relation to democracy may be explained by the fact that the concept

of free elections is more prominently featured in the media and, consequently, more strongly associated with democracy than the ability to vote for any political party. This may also be due to the participants' lack of voting experience in the host society, as all the participants in this study were recent immigrants who had not yet become citizens and, therefore, did not have the right to vote. Indeed, the idea that all citizens can vote for any political party in elections refers more to the practical act of voting, as voters inevitably select a party when casting their ballots. On the other hand, the statement that people choose their leaders in free elections refers more broadly to the general principles of how democracy functions. While the general principle of free elections is easily memorable due to its abstract nature, the concept of voting for any political party requires more reflection on the procedure. These procedural considerations are likely to be more interesting to individuals who have already participated in the voting process, but this can only be confirmed through additional research on a sample of voting citizens. The lower assessment of the claim that citizens can vote for any political party can also be explained by immigrants' political experiences prior to their immigration. Existing research suggests that individuals who live in party autocracies have many reasons to dislike political parties and distrust parties (Just 2019).

The **second hypothesis**, suggesting that gender equality is not viewed as an essential attribute of democracy by recent immigrants, has not been confirmed. All forms of gender equality included in the questionnaire were deemed very essential attributes of democracy, although to varying degrees. The study assumes that the strong association between democracy and gender equality among recent immigrants is likely a result of the impressions they form while living in the host society. Their ideas about the relationship between democracy and gender equality were perhaps influenced by their observations of social relations and behaviors in the host society. However, recent immigrants perceive gender equality in different areas as being essential for democracy in varying degrees. According to the respondents, the most crucial aspects of gender equality for democracy are equality in access to university education and equality between men and women before the law. The significance of gender equality in all other spheres is estimated considerably lower. The t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the means of the following pairs of questions:

- Men and women have equal rights to study at university and at school, boys and girls have the same duties and the same rights;
- Men and women are equal before the law and men and women have the same right to open a private business;
- Men and women are equal before the law and men and women can get the same jobs;
- At school, boys and girls have the same duties and the same rights, and in the family, men and women have the same obligations (Table 3).

The last one (i.e., the least important for democracy) is the statement that men and women have the same obligations in the family (probably the most important and sensitive sphere for the respondents, i.e., people from more traditional societies than their host society) (Table 1). The term "obligations" in the context of family might also be confusing for participants, as various things could be considered covered by this term, including biological gender differences. In general, the results indicate that the respondents are more inclined to acknowledge the significance of gender equality in areas further removed from their daily lives, such as university education and equality before the law, than in areas closely connected to their everyday experiences, such as school, work, and family. Moreover, gender equality before the law aligns with their ideas on strong social control and the rule of law (where everyone respects the law).

The **third hypothesis**, proposing that elements related to a striving economy should be viewed as essential attributes of democracy, and the **fifth hypothesis**, suggesting that public goods accessible to all should be seen as essential democratic attributes by recent immigrants, have been confirmed. As anticipated, all elements related to economic prosperity or public goods are considered very essential attributes of democracy. Moreover, some

public goods (such as public libraries and pools) are regarded as essential to democracy as a well-known and indisputable political attribute, such as free elections of political leaders (Table 1). This can be explained by the fact that recent immigrants typically begin exploring their host society through its easily accessible public goods, and since they are aware that their host society is democratic, they might naturally tend to associate democracy with the host society, specifically with their most vivid impressions of the host society. Public libraries, swimming pools, and supermarkets are prevalent in Montreal, and newcomers can easily access them. The extensive presence and availability of these amenities might greatly impress newcomers from countries less affluent than Canada, with less developed infrastructure and public sectors. It is not surprising, then, that these goods are strongly associated with democracy and are perceived by recent immigrants as very essential for democracy. This strong association between democracy and public goods in the host society supports the hypothesis that recent immigrants' conceptions of democracy are influenced by their daily experiences in the host society, possibly even more than by theoretical knowledge about democracy.

Table 3. Results of paired samples t-test: importance of gender equality in different spheres.

Question	Mean (Std. Deviation)	t	p-Value (2-Tailed)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> men and women have the same rights to study at university at school, boys and girls have the same duties and the same rights 	3.768 (0.477)	2.474	0.015
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> men and women are equal before the law men and women have the same right to open a private business 	3.712 (0.593)	2.367	0.019
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> men and women are equal before the law men and women can get the same job 	3.709 (0.592)	1.984	0.049
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> at school, boys and girls have the same duties and the same rights men and women have equal opportunities to become political leaders 	3.613 (0.729)	1.221	0.224
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> at school, boys and girls have the same duties and the same rights in the family, men and women have the same obligations 	3.600 (0.730)	2.076	0.040
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> men and women have the same right to open a private business in the family, men and women have the same obligations 	3.552 (0.615)	1.600	0.112
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> men and women can get the same job in the family, men and women have the same obligations 	3.548 (0.796)	1.271	0.206

Note: The p -value < 0.05 indicates a statistically significant difference between the two compared means.

The **fourth hypothesis**, which suggested that social control is considered essential for democracy by recent immigrants, has been confirmed. The questionnaire responses indicate that, from the respondents' perspective, the most crucial aspect of democracy is the rule of law—specifically, the respect for the law (everyone respects the laws, all political leaders must respect the laws) and equality before the law (men and women are equal before the law). The robust association between democracy and the rule of law could be explained by the theoretical knowledge of immigrants about democracy as generally presented in the media. However, it is more likely explained by their aspirations for a better social environment than those found in their home societies and their observations of the host society associated with democracy. In fact, the idea that *everyone respects the laws* can be strongly associated with a higher level of street-level safety than many immigrants from nondemocratic countries experienced in their home societies. Therefore, these results can also be considered indicative of the most valued expectations of immigrants regarding their new habitat. The strong association of respect for the law with democracy by immigrants can also be seen as a sign of their readiness to engage in the social life of the host society,

since ‘it is believed to be important that the members of a society follow the law’ (Tyler 2021), and in contemporary societies, ‘legal systems must rely on individuals feeling obligated to obey the law’ (Fine and van Rooij 2021). The factors this study links to social control, such as parents taking care of their children and compulsory school education for all, are so strongly associated with democracy, perhaps for different reasons, while reflecting the same desire for a strong social order. Caring parents may hold significant value for immigrants, which is why they strongly associate it with democracy—the notion that represents their new social environment. Compulsory school education simply reflects the reality they observe in the host society (since most of them have children), a reality that they love and accept (according to their own words during discussions before and after the study), and strongly associate with their host society and, therefore, with democracy.

Although some items in this questionnaire were added as “noise”, merely to dilute questions about gender equality and elections (undisputable attributes of modern democracies), these “noise” elements were rated quite high. Surprisingly, some of them were even rated higher than free elections and gender equality. For instance, the importance given to the protection of nature (7th place) and the supervision of pets by owners (16th place) exceeds that of the statement ‘In elections, all citizens can vote for any political party’ (17th place). The significance attributed to these elements for democracy further confirms the **fifth hypothesis**, which suggests that the impressions received in the host society may be strongly associated with democracy in the eyes of recent immigrants. Protected nature and supervised pets are perhaps among those striking differences between the host society and the societies of origin that newcomers observe during their first month in a new society. If this difference were not the case, they might not associate these aspects with democracy.

The **sixth hypothesis**, which suggested that free elections should be assessed by recent immigrants as the most essential democratic attribute, followed by factors related to a prosperous economy, then by the rule of law and social control, and all these attributes should be considered more essential for democracy than gender equality, has not been fully confirmed. Free elections, although considered very essential for democracy, are not seen as the most essential democratic attribute as expected. They only rank 12th out of 20 items and they are perceived as significantly less essential for democracy than the respect for the law (everyone respects the laws—in 1st place, and all political leaders must respect the laws—in the 2nd place), social control (parents must take care of their children—in 4th place, and men and women are equal before the law—in the 5th place), and gender equality in access to university education (in the 3rd place). Factors related to a prosperous economy and available public goods, although considered very essential for democracy, are not deemed the most essential democratic attributes, as expected. Public libraries and public pools are available to all, are ranked in the 13th place, salaries for all employees are high—in the 18th place, and there are many supermarkets and many products to buy in the 19th place. The public good considered the most important for democracy is free university education, ranking 6th out of 20 (Table 1).

The immigrants’ perceptions of a democratic society, as revealed in this study, correspond, to a certain extent to the image of democracy found in the responses of the World Values Survey respondents in various nondemocratic countries. According to the World Values Survey respondents, free election, economic prosperity, and social control are the most important attributes of democracy, and they are considered more important to democracy than gender equality—the democratic attribute most valued by democratic citizens (Zagrebina 2020b). However, participants in this study consider gender equality in certain areas, such as access to university education, equality before the law, and the same duties for boys and girls in school, as more essential for democracy than free elections and certain economic benefits, such as high salaries for all employees, and developed infrastructure, like many public libraries and swimming pools, and supermarkets. In addition, gender equality in all areas covered by the questionnaire for this study is considered more important for democracy than the possibility of voting for any political party. These findings invite deeper reflection on two things. First, familiar concepts like free elections, gender

equality, and a prosperous economy may be viewed differently if, instead of frequently spoken concepts, the study uses less familiar but more palpable formulations of the same concepts. Second, the experience of living in a democratic society can change visions of democracy by making specific aspects of the social environment, such as gender relations, and physical environment, such as infrastructure and nature, that immigrants become familiar with more essential democratic attributes for them.

The results of this study reveal possible motivations that may underlie the behavior of recent immigrants, interpreted by them as support for democracy. As mentioned above, the way people understand democracy affects their political behavior and changes their orientation towards democracy (Cho 2015; Crow 2010). The questionnaire used in this study describes, among public goods and rights, the actions that respondents should evaluate as important or not for democracy. These actions were rated by the respondents as follows, from most important to least important: obeying the laws (Everyone respects the laws), taking care of children (Parents must take care of their children), getting children to school, i.e., obeying the laws (School education is compulsory for all), protecting nature (Nature is protected), choosing political leaders participating in elections (People choose their political leaders in free elections), watching pets (Pets are always supervised by owners) and finally, voting for a political party (In elections, all citizens can vote for any political party) (Table 1). These results demonstrate that it is likely that, from the perspective of recent immigrants, their support for democracy could be reduced to the actions they deem most appropriate to support democracy: obeying the laws and caring for children. For greater reliability, however, this assumption should be tested in subsequent studies.

This study highlighted trends that could be looked for in other samples to understand the meaning of democracy among immigrants from nondemocratic countries and to gain a better understanding of their political participation. However, as the study used a convenience sample collected in Quebec, it is not clear to what extent the results could be generalized to the entire population of immigrants in Canada or elsewhere.

5. Conclusions

The objective of this study was to examine whether recent immigrants, i.e., individuals socialized in nondemocratic societies and with several months of experience living in an advanced democratic society, associate democracy with free elections, gender equality, a prospering economy, and social control, as well as with different aspects of the physical and social environment they observed in their host society. The results show that recent immigrants see free elections of political leaders as significantly more important to democracy than the possibility of voting for any political party. This difference might be explained, among other things, by their political experiences acquired prior to immigration. Contrary to expectations, respondents consider that gender equality in all areas covered by the questionnaire is very important for democracy. This strong association between democracy and gender equality may be due to impressions received when observing social relations and behavior in the host society. Thus, gender equality might be associated first with the host society, and mainly through association with the host society, it is linked to democracy, as the host society serves as the primary, if not the only one, living example of a democratic society for immigrants from less democratized societies. Recent immigrants see democracy above all as a society based on the rule of law (everyone respects the laws, including political leaders, men and women are equal before the law) and with strong social control (parents must take care of their children, school education is compulsory for all). This may reflect both their ideas about an appropriate social order developed in their home societies (one with strong social control) and their aspirations for a better social environment than in their home societies, as well as observations of the host society (one with the rule of law).

The immigrants' concepts of democracy imply that the most striking characteristics of the social and physical environment of the host society (such things as protected nature and public libraries and swimming pools, as well as supermarkets with many products)

are seen as very essential democratic attributes, along with democratic political attributes. This means that when forming their ideas about democracy, immigrants may combine their most vivid impressions received from the host society with theoretical knowledge about democracy. Among behaviors the most supportive of democracy, recent immigrants consider obeying the laws and taking care of children. Electoral participation, regardless of how it is considered, is viewed as very important for democracy, but not as important as respect for laws and caring for children.

These results show that concepts as familiar as democracy and free elections can be interpreted by recent immigrants in specific ways based on their experiences in their host society and possibly their previous theoretical knowledge on these topics. Lived experiences may affect immigrants' view of democracy more than theoretical information gained from sources other than life experience. This seems plausible because direct experience contributes to the formation of attitudes (Petty et al. 1995). This study reveals that the process of forming ideas about democracy among immigrants from nondemocratic countries is much more complex than just acquiring theoretical knowledge about the democratic political system. Since humans appreciate the social and physical environment of their society and view these as essential attributes of that society, they may tend to associate the most vivid manifestations of these environments with the socio-political regime. Therefore, the study concludes that a more welcoming and inclusive society, known as democratic, could foster a more positive image of democracy among immigrants from less democratized societies.

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