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Abstract Social psychologists have explored the multiple forms of *status quo* legitimization mainly in regard to the social and economic system. This study aimed to explore the tendency to legitimize the political system by developing and validating a scale of democratic system justification (DSJ). We administered a scale composed of 8 items, mainly derived from the extant system justification scales (Jost and Thompson in J Exp Soc Psychol, 3:209–232, 2000; Kay and Jost in J Pers Soc Psychol, 85:823–837, 2003; Jost and Kay in J Pers Soc Psychol, 88:498–509, 2005; Jost et al. in Dubois Rev Soc Sci Race, 6:103–124, 2009) to an Italian sample of 205 participants. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses indicated that the scale has a one-dimensional structure. Results also showed that internal reliability of the scale was good; moreover, correlational analyses and group comparisons confirmed the convergent and discriminant validity of the scale. Implications for the assessment of the DSJ and future directions of research on this topic are discussed.

Keywords Democratic system justification · Political system justification · Scale validation · Legitimizing ideologies · Political psychology

1 Introduction

The stability of the democratic system, differently from other political ones, is due to its legitimization and, consequently, to the degree to which people have interiorized democratic attitudes (Diamond 1999; Ariely and Davidov 2011). Results from national surveys

monitoring citizens' orientation toward democracy showed that democracy has achieved a worldwide mass approval and "has become virtually the only political model with global appeal" (Inglehart 2003, p. 52).

In Western states, the prevailing form of government is democracy, a system of co-existence that the modern world has assumed as a model in the last two centuries. According to the democracy index (an index based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture), 78 out of 167 world countries (46.71 %) can be defined as full or flawed democracies. The percentage rises to 95.7 % when considering only North American and West European countries. On the whole, data indicate that about half (48.4 %) of the world population lives in a democratic country. The rating for Italy was 31. Italy with Greece and France dropped out of the category of full democracies between 2008 and 2010 (Economist Intelligence Unit 2011).

Present political difficulties can be traced: the diminished role of the Parliament (pre-sence of "Governo dei Tecnici": a Prime Minister not belonging to any political party was appointed by the President of the Italian Republic and he then summoned Ministers with technical competences and no political affiliations); the rise of protest movement (in the 2013 political election a new born non-political movement, Movimento 5 Stelle, catalyzed the people's indignation against political corruption and incompetence and, grounded on democratic convictions, got around 25 % of votes; the disappearance of well defined borders between political parties; the lack of reference points which led to delegitimation of the system due to disaffection, the lack of identification and the feeling of not being represented).

A number of studies have examined the psychological and sociological dimensions underlying of the choice of political representatives in democratic systems since the 1950s, nevertheless only recently have the cognitive and motivational processes been investigated. For example the Motivated Social Cognitive perspective highlights how political attitudes may be principled as well as motivationally driven.

Ideologies differ in the extent to which they serve to justify reigning social systems (e.g., Jost and Hunyady 2005). For example, conservative ideology typically favors the preservation the societal status quo, whereas liberal, radical, and progressive ideologies often seek to reform or revise it (e.g., Jost et al. 2004, 2003a, b). Dispositional and situational factors that stimulate the motivation to reduce uncertainty and threat also tend to increase the appeal of conservative, system-justifying beliefs and decrease the appeal of progressive, system-challenging beliefs (Jost and Hunyady 2005). Research reveals, for instance, that heightened epistemic motives to achieve certainty and closure and/or heightened existential motives to minimize fear and threat are associated with increased conservatism with respect to political opinions, candidate preferences, and even ideolog-ical self-placement (Bonanno and Jost 2006; Jost et al. 2003a, b). Jost (2009) underlines how voting intentions may be predicted by self-identification as liberal, moderate or conservative, in other words for example, resistance or openness to change may tell the difference between conservatives and liberals.

Moreover, as political justification, can be regarded at as a cognitive/motivational process, it represents a valuable dimension to be explored as a predictor of political vote intentions. The present study suggests a self-report scale as an instrument to estimate the relevance of motivation in justifying the societal status quo (democratic system justifica-tion). Assuming that belief formation involves both directional and non-directional motives, we consider that the tendency to justify the political system is a kind of matching process that is most likely to satisfy people's psychological needs and motivations (such as

the need for order, structure, and closure and the avoidance of uncertainty or threat) (Jost et al. 2003a, b).

Starting from the 50 s several scholars have studied people's perception of the system and its influence on attitudes—see, for example, Newcomb (1943)research at the Bennington college and Moscovici's (1984) studies on social representations and active minorities. More recently, Jost and colleagues (Jost and Banaji 1994; Jost et al. 2004) have started to regard at such issues in the light of the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) and the Social Dominance Orientation (Sidanius and Pratto 1999) from which they developed their system justification theory (SJT). It posits that people tend to justify the system they live in and to perceive it as fair, balanced and just. Jost and Van der Toorn (2012) drawing from philosophical, psychological, and sociological traditions, posit that individuals facing various kinds of threats (Wakslak et al. 2011) justify and defend the existing system. People tend to believe that the social system is orderly, predictable, and above all just, as they need to feel a sense of trust and hope in their future.

Jost and Hunyady (2005) suggest a number of potential consequences of the social status quo justification on a variety of personal and social outcomes. Undeniably, the status quo justification may lead to increased positive affect and decreased negative affect, as well as increased subjective well-being, perception of legitimacy and decreased support for the social change among both high- and low-status group members.

Exploring justification is worthwhile because it represents a relevant approach in social psychology as well as in political studies (Jost and Sidanius 2004; Jost et al. 2009), in economics (Jost and Thompson 2000), in the complex field of gender differences studies (Jost and Kay 2005), and in social studies as well (Wakslak et al. 2011). The original System Justification scale (Jost and Banaji 1994) has in fact been used in a variety of research and, subsequently, has become the starting point for the development of measures tapping the tendency to justify various facets of the social system. More specifically, Jost and Kay (2005) developed the Gender-specific System Justification scale in order to study the impact of gender stereotypes and sexism on the legitimization of the status quo; Jost and Thompson (2000) proposed the economic System Justification (EJS) scale to investigate the relationship between legitimization and racial and social policy attitudes, opposition to equality and political conservatism.

Hence, on the whole, social psychologists have explored the multiple forms of *status quo* legitimization such as behaviors, thoughts, and personal dispositions. People's tendency to legitimize the democratic political system has never been addressed from a psychosocial perspective. We believe that investigating this issue may be very important for three main reasons.

First of all, the justification of the democratic political system represents a specific form of justification and may allow researchers to explore and explain a variety of political outcomes strictly related to social beliefs, both at behavioral level (e.g., different forms of involvement in political activities) and attitudinal level (e.g., political efficacy). Second, the tendency to justify may influence either the attitude that affect the intergroup relations among a specific context (favoritism, identification, and so on), or the motives that may explode in conflicts among opposing forces. Third, differently from social and EJS, democratic system justification (DSJ) should not be related to people degree of conservatism. In fact, the gap between liberals and conservatives, between left- and right-wingers, is related to different worldviews (Graham et al. 2009; Jost 2006), especially as concerns the family, sexuality, social equity, and so on (Lakoff 2002, 2008). Recent studies showed that conservatism can no longer be considered as a one-dimensional construct (Weber and Federico 2012). More specifically, research indicated two important

dimensions at the core of political ideologies: the first one is related to the economic sphere (involving issues such as hierarchy, inequality, and economic considerations in general) while the second one pertains to the social sphere (concerning issues related to the status quo, social order, and stability issues) (Conover and Feldman 1981; Duckitt 2001; McClosky and Zaller 1984; Weber and Federico 2007). These core dimensions of political ideologies are in fact respectively related to the economic and the social systems, but not to the democratic one. We expect beliefs concerning the democratic political system in general to be independent from political ideology, i.e. the degree of conservatism.

1.1 Political Legitimacy

The concept of legitimacy in political and social studies is a central theme since it "pertains to how power may be used in ways that citizens consciously accept" (Gilley 2006).

Psychologists, social psychologists in particular, have explored the multiple forms of *status quo* legitimation such as behavior, thought, and personal disposition, but it is in the dimensions of the sociological approach that we can find the root of political *status quo* legitimation. In particular, Max Weber already faced the issue of the nature of power legitimation back in 1919, identifying three "ideal" types of legitimation: the "traditional domination" held by patriarchs or derived from feudalism and patrimonialism, the "charismatic" domination represented by religion and family, and lastly "legal domination" grounded on rationally formulated rules: bureaucracy and the modern state. As a property of governance, political legitimacy is made up of two components that Gurr (1971) highlighted stating that "governance can be considered legitimate in so far as its subjects regard it as proper and deserving of support", that's to say, governance is characterized by justifiableness according to norms and values (normative component) and by public trust and support (empirical component), sustained by traditions and charismatic—even religious—leadership and also by the delivery of welfare and protection to subjects (Meyer 1999). Any system claiming to be democratic cannot but be grounded on these two components.

2 Goals and Hypotheses

The main aim of this research was to develop and validate a scale to measure justifying beliefs about the democratic political system, defined as the whole of political institutions of a democratic state. To this end we created a scale of DSJ mainly drawing on the original scales of system justification (Jost and Thompson 2000; Kay and Jost 2003; Jost and Kay 2005; Jost et al. 2009). In order to check for convergent validity, we compared DSJ scores with EJS scores (Jost and Thompson 2000) and political group identity (PGI) (Mael and Tetrick 1992). We expected EJS to be positively correlated with the DSJ because, even if they tap two specific dimensions (namely the economic one and the political one), as they are both related to beliefs about the legitimacy of the social system. Moreover, we also expected a positive correlation between DSJ and political identification, as the latter refers to the degree to which an individual perceives him/herself as a member of a political group, i.e. a party. Political parties are the very essence of democratic pluralism and the legitimization of the democratic system is functional to their own. We thus expected highly identified people to show high levels of DSJ because their group- and political system-justification motives are aligned (Carter et al. 2011).

In order to check for the discriminant validity, we compared scores of the DSJ among men and women, as well as among people who were actively involved in a political party and those who were not. As previous research showed that high status group members should have a stronger tendency to justify the system than low-status group members (Jost and Banaji 1994), we expected higher scores of DSJ from men, who have traditionally held power, due to traditional sex roles, norms and institutional rules (Hirschowitz 1987; Jenkins 1994; Stewart and Chester 1982), compared to women. We also expected people who were enrolled in a political party to have a stronger tendency to justify the democratic system than people who were not, mainly because, as discussed above, their group- and democratic system-justifications are entwined.

3 Method

3.1 Participants

Two-hundred and five Italians aged between 18 and 70 ($M = 29.79$, SD $= 9.09$) took part in this study. Men were 111 (54.1 %) and women were 94 (45.9 %). Some participants (28.3 %) identified themselves as students, 10.7 % as student-workers, 36.6 % as employees, 19 % as self-employed and 5.4 % as unemployed.

3.2 Procedure and Measures

The questionnaire employed in this study was administered online and anonymity was guaranteed. It included one section asking for personal information and one section with the following scales:

- Democratic system justification. The scale (DSJ) was made up of 8 items (see Table 1) developed from the literature concerning system justification (Jost et al. 2003a, b, 2005, 2009) to assess people's beliefs in the fairness of the existing political system.

  The scale was constructed to measure beliefs and dispositional effects on DSJ. Drawing from the items of System Justification scales developed by Jost and colleagues (e.g., "In general, you find society to be fair", "American society needs to be radically restructured"), we developed items specific for the democratic political system. Some examples of items are as follow: "In general, I believe that our democratic system is fair", "Our democratic system is the best possible", "Parties represent the different souls of society" (see Table 1 for item full texts).

- Economic system justification (EJS). The Italian version (Caricati 2008) of the EJS scale (Jost and Thompson 2000) was used in an abridged form. We only included the six items that were reported to have the highest factor loadings in the Italian validation of the scale (Caricati 2008). Participants stated how much they agreed with the each item (some examples are: "Equal distribution of resources is unnatural" and "If people wanted to change the economic system to make things equal, they could", reverse-scored) on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree). Based on $\alpha = .64$, we computed a mean index of EJS.

- Political group identity (PGI). We used Mael and Tetrick's (1992) Identification with a Psychological Group (IDPG) scale. Previous research proved this scale to be widely applicable to a variety of social group, including political groups (Brewer and Silver

Table 1 democratic system justification scale items, means and standard deviations, factor loadings and item-total correlations

Items	Mean	SD	Loadings	Item-total correlations
1. In generale, ritengo che il nostro sistema democratico sia equo [In general, I believe that our democratic system is fair]	3.38	1.81	.759	.550
2. In generale, il sistema politico italiano opera come dovrebbe [In general, the Italian political system operates as it should]	2.29	1.37	.797	.637
3. Il sistema politico italiano andrebbe radicalmente ristrutturato (r) [The Italian political system needs to be radically restructured]	2.72	2.10	.429	.298
4. Il nostro sistema democratico è il migliore possibile [Our democratic system is the best possible]	2.78	1.92	.641	.435
5. La maggior parte delle politiche servono per il bene comune [Most policies serve the collective good]	3.69	2.23	.542	.359
6. La politica è costruita in modo tale che siano i migliori ad andare avanti [Politics is set up so that the best get haed]	2.20	1.74	.458	.309
7. I partiti rappresentano le diverse anime della società [Parties represent the different souls of society]	3.40	2.12	.621	.451
8. I politici oggi agiscono maggiormente in funzione delle lobby che dei cittadini [Today politicians act more in favor of the lobbies than of the citizens] (r)	2.95	2.00	.376	.240

(r) = reverse scored

2000). Thus, following Greene (2004), we asked participants to score their agreement (on a scale ranging from 1, *strongly disagree*, to 5, *strongly agree*) on 10 sentences by referring to their favored party. Some examples are: "When someone criticizes this group, it feels like a personal insult", "I don't act like the typical person of this group", reversed. Based on $\alpha = .86$, we computed a mean index of PGI.

- Political orientation and enrollment in a party. Participants were asked to indicate their political orientation on a 7-point left–right axis (1 = left, 7 = right) and whether they were enrolled in a party or not.

4 Results

4.1 Factor Analyses and Reliability

To assess the appropriateness of using factor analysis on the dataset we carried out the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The KMO value was .78, which is greater than the required value of .5. The Bartlett's test of sphericity was found to be significant with a p value $< .001$ ($\chi^2 = 290.04$, $df = 28$). These results indicated that it was appropriate to conduct an exploratory factor analysis to assess the psychometric properties of the scale. All the 8 items of the scale of DSJ were subjected to a principal component factor analysis. According to both the screeplot criterion and the eigenvalues, a one-dimensional solution was obtained. The factor accounted for 35.45 % of the total variance. Factor loadings of each item (presented in Table 1) were all $>.38$. Then, to further investigate the structure of the scale, maximum likelihood confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were

performed (Fig. 1). CFI values greater than .90 were accepted (Kelloway 1998; Kline 1998) as well as RMSEA values lower than .07 (Browne and Cudeck 1993) and SRMR values lower than .08 (Kelloway 1998). For the RMSEA, a non-significant p value means the hypothesized model is a good approximation of the population.

Fit indexes for the one-dimensional solution were very satisfactory: $CFI = .950$, $TLI = .927$, $RMSEA = .059$, $SRMR = .045$. R software was used for CFAs.

After recoding the reversed items, we tested the internal reliability of the scale. We obtained a Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$ which is over the conventional threshold. Moreover, the coefficient was higher than Cronbach's α obtained from the administration of both the original version of the system justification scale (e.g., Pacilli et al. 2011) and the original version of the EJS scale (e.g., Jost et al. 2003a, b) to Italian samples. We then computed a mean index of DSJ: it ranged from 1.00 to 6.25, with a mean value of 2.93 (SD = 1.10).

4.2 Convergent Validity

In order to test the convergent validity of the DSJ we correlated the scale with other two measures, namely the PGI and the ESJ. As expected, Pearson's correlation between DSJ and ESJ was .16 ($p < .05$) while the correlation between DSJ and PGI was .28 ($p < .001$). The DSJ scale was not related to participants' political orientation. This supported the idea that the DSJ scale taps a dimension that goes beyond the degree of conservatism. Table 2 reports correlations among these variables.

4.3 Discriminant Validity

T test analysis showed gender differentiations: Men ($M = 3.07$), as expected, showed higher levels of democratic system legitimization than women ($M = 2.76$), $t (203) = 2.03$, $p < .05$. In line with the expectations, we also found a significant difference in democratic system legitimization levels between people who are enrolled in a party ($M = 4.28$) and people who are not ($M = 2.83$), $t (203) = 5.03$, $p < .001$.

5 Discussion

The aim of this study was to develop and validate a measure able to assess people's beliefs about the justification of the democratic political system. Results of explorative and confirmatory factor analyses clearly showed that the scale has a one-dimensional structure and has a good internal reliability. The convergent validity of the scale was analyzed by exploring its relation to other two measures: correlational analyses showed that the DSJ scale was positively associated with the ESJ scale (Jost and Thompson 2000) which

Table 2 Correlation among variables ($N = 205$)

	1	2	3	4
1. DSJ	–			
2. PGI	.28***	–		
3. ESJ	.16*	−.04	–	
4. Political orientation	.08	−.13	.42***	–

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

measures the tendency to justify the economic system and with the PGI (Mael and Tetrick 1992) that measures the level of identification with a political group, i.e. the favored party. Moreover, the DSJ scale was suitable to discriminate among different groups of people: in particular, DSJ scores are different between genders, with men showing higher levels of DSJ than women, and among people who are enrolled in a party and those who are not, with the former ones showing higher levels of DSJ than the latter. These findings support the discriminant validity of the scale. Indeed, previous research showed that high status group members should have a stronger tendency to justify the system than low-status group members (Jost and Banaji 1994): gender differentiation in the DSJ scores was in line with this idea. Moreover, in line with our expectations, we found that participants who are enrolled in a party show higher levels of DSJ, supporting the idea that group- and democratic system-justifications are entwined.

In the light of these results, it seems that the DSJ scale can be inserted in the available set of instruments measuring the propensity to legitimate the existing system, together with the already existing scales. Particularly, the study of this new dimension of legitimization can be a useful tool to explore global and/or local scenarios, allowing researchers to investigate aspects of both behavioral and attitudinal processes linked to the political beliefs people holds.

However, and more importantly, no relationship between the DSJ and political orientation exists: democratic justification belongs neither to the left nor to the right; in fact, it does not appear as politically oriented at all. While in contrast with previous studies showing that conservatives have a stronger tendency to justify the system than liberals (Jost et al. 2003a, b; Jost 2006), this result is in line with our expectations. Moreover, people who place themselves on the left–right political axis implicitly agree to define their own political orientation referring to the actual democratic system. It would be very interesting in future studies to investigate the endorsement of democratic system-justifying beliefs among politically independents as well as to investigate how strictly political involvement, such as in political parties, associations, and movements, even in the extremist ones, would affect the perception of legitimization assessed by our scale.

In this work we focused on the ideological beliefs dimension about political system. This ideological approach focuses on citizens' commitment to democratic principles as an abstract ideal. Mishler and Rose (2001) suggested the existence of a further dimension, a variant of ideological approach that they labeled "satisfaction approach". This dimension emphasizes popular assessments of democratic performance and claims that these two dimensions contribute to the understanding of democratic system functioning. Future research could involve measures of evaluation of the democratic performances such as the "realistic measures of democracy" scale (Mishler and Rose 2001) together with the DSJ scale to investigate relationships between these two complementary dimensions. Also, to enlarge the potential sample and avoid risks of excluding some sections of society who do not have access to the Internet or are not so familiar with it, a paper-and-pencil version could be administrated (Fig.1).

In the light of the importance of the legitimization of the democratic system in relation to individual and interpersonal psychological variables, the scale developed to assess such dimension may open new paths in psycho-social and socio-political studies. It would be actually interesting to investigate the relationship between DSJ and personal— (e.g., political efficacy, self-esteem and political commitment), group— (i.e. parties' cohesion), and social-level variables. As far as the latter is concerned, studies investigating the link between democratic legitimization and prejudice, stereotypes and classical social beliefs such as social dominance orientation (Sidanius and Pratto 1999), and general system
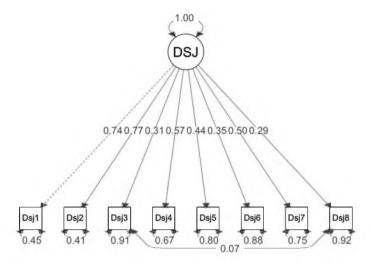
Fig. 1 Confirmatory factor analyses

justification (Jost and Banaji 1994; Jost and Burgess 2000) could be conducted taking advantage of this assessment tool.

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