

# When do voters accept democratic backsliding?

## A conjoint analysis of distinct types of backsliding on diverse dimensions of democracy

Marta Vuković, Jan Rovny, Ben Stanley, and Piotr Zagórski

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### Abstract

In Europe and beyond, an increasing number of political actors are challenging core democratic principles while maintaining electoral success. This article examines when and why voters accept democratic backsliding by conceptualizing three distinct forms of democratic violation: populist, illiberal, and authoritarian (PIA), each representing different degrees and mechanisms for undermining democracy. Using a conjoint experiment with representative samples across seven European countries (N=7,000), we assess how citizens evaluate political parties that engage in these diverse types of democratic violations. Our findings reveal that citizens punish authoritarian and illiberal violations more severely than populist ones, with populist framing even being rewarded by voters when it comes to the dimension of civil liberties. Additionally, citizens consistently punish violations of electoral fairness most strongly, with violations of the rule of law and civil liberties facing less backlash. Finally, cultural policy congruence reduces voters' willingness to punish all types of democratic violations, more so than economic congruence. These findings help explain how democratic backsliding persists despite widespread support for democracy in principle, demonstrating how populist type of democratic backsliding and cultural alignment create pathways for politicians to undermine democracy while escaping electoral penalties.

### Keywords

Democratic backsliding, populism, illiberalism, authoritarianism, dimensions of democracy, policy congruence

# 1 Introduction

In established Western democracies, political leaders are increasingly violating some of the core democratic standards without losing electoral legitimacy. This takes place despite the widespread *declared* support for democracy among citizens. This raises important questions about the conditions under which voters are willing to accept democratic backsliding, and which aspects of democracy are perceived as dispensable - or at least of secondary importance - by citizens.

To address these questions, this article takes a nuanced approach by disentangling different *types* of democratic backsliding and how they can be used by politicians to attack various dimensions of liberal democracy. First, this article argues that democratic backsliding occurs in three essential types: populist, illiberal, and authoritarian (PIA). These types differ both in their nature and in the degree to which they undermine democracy. Second, the actions of backsliding politicians can attack three fundamental dimensions central to contemporary liberal democracies: the holding of free and fair elections; the rule of law; and the protection of the civil liberties (Møller and Skaaning, 2013; Svolik et al., 2023; Frederiksen, 2024).

In order to assess the effects of different types of democratic violations on diverse dimensions of democracy, this article uses a pre-registered survey-based conjoint experiment administered to representative samples of voters in seven European countries. The respondents evaluated conjoint pairs of parties on the basis of electoral programs that proposed distinct policy objectives regarding the economy and immigration. Additionally, these programs also provided details about parties' commitment to various dimensions of democracy, varying whether the party adheres to liberal democratic principles or goes against them - either in populist, illiberal or authoritarian (PIA) manner. Thus, respondents were forced to choose between two parties advocating for either a liberal democratic, populist, illiberal, or authoritarian approach to three key dimensions of democracy: free and fair elections, rule of law, and civil liberties. These choices were independent, allowing for an assessment of democratic trade-offs on each democratic dimension independently.

This article contributes to the literature on democratic backsliding in multiple ways. First, it conceptually distinguishes between the populist, illiberal, and authoritarian forms of democratic backsliding, showing how diversions from liberal democracy which are often insufficiently distinguished or treated synonymously are distinct both in framing and degree. Second, the article empirically demonstrates the distinct effects of these types of democratic backsliding when applied to different dimensions of democracy. Third, it is shown that voter-party congruence on the cultural axis matters for tolerance to democratic violations more than alignment on the economic policy.

Three key findings stand out. First, authoritarian deviations from the liberal democratic norm are

less tolerated compared to the illiberal ones and especially the populist ones, with the latter sometimes being the preferred option even over the liberal democratic baseline. Second, while PIA deviations from free and fair elections are punished to a great extent, civil liberties and, especially, the rule of law are more likely to be traded off. In case of rule of law, even severe authoritarian backsliding is tolerated up to a similar point as the more moderate illiberal and populist regressions. Third, voters prioritize cultural policy alignment over adherence to democratic norms, particularly on the dimension of the rule of law. Even a party with authoritarian stances on the rule of law which is congruent on cultural matters is preferred to a non-congruent liberal democratic party.

These findings have far-reaching implications for our understanding of democratic backsliding and for the possible remedies aimed at increasing liberal democratic resilience. As this article shows, political parties can get away with certain violations of the rules of the game. As examples from Poland, Hungary or the US demonstrate, particularly the democratic dimensions of the rule of law is at risk of backsliding. Voters seem to have difficulty distinguishing between populist, illiberal, and authoritarian violations of the rule of law, and are less likely to punish parties that are culturally aligned with them.

## 2 When do citizens oppose democracy?

The increasing - and often repeated - electoral success of politicians in contemporary liberal democracies who openly defy the key institutions and norms of the political systems in which they rose to power has occasioned substantial scholarly interest in recent years ([Krishnarajan, 2022](#); [Graham and Svolik, 2020](#); [Wunsch and Gessler, 2023](#); [Svolik et al., 2023](#)). A particular puzzle is the fact that such democratic backsliding happens in spite of widespread declared support for democracy among the citizens of these countries ([Ferrín and Kriesi, 2016](#)). The literature to date has supplied different explanations for this phenomenon.

One of the most cited studies, by [Graham and Svolik \(2020\)](#), focusing on the U.S., argues that partisans are particularly willing to trade off democracy for favoured outcomes, and that this tendency is exacerbated in conditions of high polarization. However, these results may be specific to a two-party system, where voters have fewer alternative party options than in multiparty systems. Addressing this, [Svolik et al. \(2023\)](#)'s more recent study examines the conditions under which voters trade off democratic principles in European multiparty democracies. They show that politically disengaged citizens and far-right voters are least likely to punish politicians who exhibit undemocratic behavior. Additionally, they show that voters do not punish transgressions of all democratic principles equally. Namely, the average

mainstream voter cares more about the electoral features of democracy than its liberal aspects, making them less likely to punish politicians' violations of civil liberties.

Scholars have also examined the effect of policy congruence on voters' willingness to punish undemocratic behavior, with mixed findings. [Frederiksen \(2024\)](#) sets out to test how much partisanship accounts for one's willingness to overlook democratic transgressions and how much the Downsian spatial model can explain this behavior — that is, whether voters who are ideologically closer to a party are more likely to overlook its transgressions. He also extends the geographical scope of existing research to non-European and non-U.S. countries, such as Mexico and South Korea. Unlike [Graham and Svolik \(2020\)](#), he does not find strong support for the argument that partisans are less likely to punish undemocratic behavior. In contrast to expectations, he even finds that policy agreement between voters and candidates increases the likelihood of punishing undemocratic behavior.

However, studies by [Lewandowsky and Jankowski \(2023\)](#) and [Serup Christensen and Saikkonen \(2024\)](#) show that voters are more likely to overlook democratic transgressions in the face of policy congruence. [Serup Christensen and Saikkonen \(2024\)](#), running a survey experiment in Finland, also find, contrary to their expectations, that policy congruence matters not only for traditional left-right issues but also for socio-cultural policy dimensions. [Lewandowsky and Jankowski \(2023\)](#) further find that citizens are not only less likely to punish undemocratic politicians when their policy stances align with those of the (undemocratic) party, but that this effect is particularly strong among voters with authoritarian and populist attitudes.

[Wunsch et al. \(2025\)](#) also investigate who is more likely to punish undemocratic behavior and what types of undemocratic behavior are sanctioned by voters. They test these mechanisms in Poland, distinguishing between majoritarian and authoritarian transgressions. Unlike some of the research mentioned above, which assumes that voters engage in trade-offs - that is, they support democracy but are willing to compromise on it for other priorities such as partisanship or policy preferences - [Wunsch et al. \(2025\)](#) argue that not all citizens conceptualize democracy in the same way. Some may understand it in majoritarian terms, while others adopt a more complex view of democracy where checks and balances are essential, and this difference should influence their willingness to punish undemocratic behavior.

They find that individuals whose view of democracy aligns with the liberal democratic model are more likely to punish undemocratic behavior. Specifically, the more respondents' liberal orientation increases, the more they prefer a liberal candidate over a non-liberal contender. In contrast, individuals who subscribe to an authoritarian view of democracy are more likely to choose authoritarian candidates over

liberal ones, though these effects are somewhat weaker than those observed in the liberal orientation-liberal candidate relationship. However, interestingly, they find that a majoritarian understanding of democracy is substantially less strongly associated with preferences for candidates who transgress democratic principles in majoritarian ways than liberal and authoritarian understandings are with support for congruent political candidates.

Our study builds on existing research on democratic backsliding in several ways. First, we account for the fact that backsliding politicians may depart from the key tenets of liberal democracy to varying extents, and with varying consequences for their support among voters. We clearly distinguish between populist, illiberal, and authoritarian types of democratic backsliding with the aim of identifying how each of these contexts conditions the willingness of citizens to punish violations of different democratic dimensions.

Secondly, we distinguish between three distinct democratic dimensions to ascertain the extent to which voters are, conditional on the aforementioned types of democratic backsliding, more likely to punish violations of some democratic principles than others.

Thirdly, our study advances the literature examining the effects of policy congruence on voters' willingness to punish democratic transgressions by investigating whether there are differential effects of congruence depending on the policy dimension. By distinguishing between socio-cultural and economic dimensions, our study offers a more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which voters hold politicians accountable for undemocratic behavior.

### 3 Liberal democracy and its opponents

Our starting premise is that politicians who adhere to the principles of liberal democracy will be rewarded by the electorate, while any deviations from this model will be penalized. The first reason for this is that liberal democratic conduct remains the standard by which recent instances of elite-driven democratic backsliding have been measured, at least in Europe [Frederiksen \(2022a, 2024\)](#). We assume that the “democratic default” is that citizens expect politicians to govern democratically, acknowledge electoral defeats, and remain within the bounds of their institutional authority (see findings by [Wunsch and Gessler \(2023\)](#); [Frederiksen \(2022a\)](#)).

*H1a: Parties with liberal democratic features will be more likely to be chosen than parties with pop-*

*ulist, illiberal or authoritarian (PIA) features.*

Having established liberal democracy as the benchmark of reference for elites and voters alike, we identify three distinct alternative forms of political organization that imply distinct projects of democratic backsliding. These forms differ both in their level of opposition to liberal democracy, as well as in the ways in which they are described and justified.

### 3.1 Populism

Populism is often described as a thin-centered ideology that views society as divided into two opposing and internally homogenous groups: “the people” and “the elite” (Mudde, 2004; Kriesi, 2014). This division is not just descriptive but deeply antagonistic and moralistic, portraying “the people” as inherently virtuous and “the elite” as corrupt and self-serving. A core element of populism is the belief that political decisions should directly reflect the general will of the people, emphasizing popular sovereignty (Canovan, 1999). The emphasis populism places on popular sovereignty and rule by the people may seem inherently democratic. Populists can easily present themselves as advocates of “real”, “undiluted” democracy in which the popular will is enacted in an unmediated fashion. However, by eschewing constraints on popular rule and framing democracy as purely majoritarian in character, populism undermines the core liberal democratic principle that minorities must be protected against the tyranny of the majority.

While populists often articulate their views in unsubtle ways, populism dilutes democracy in a relatively subtle fashion which, especially in homogeneous societies, may not necessarily initially be perceptible as a violation. Indeed, one of the things that distinguishes populists from illiberals and authoritarians is their claim to be redeeming democracy’s initial promise, rather than advancing an alternative political system. In addition, from the demand-side, the populist model of democracy does not seem to be perceived as an alternative to the liberal model of democracy but rather as its complement (Ferrín and Kriesi 2025). Given how inconspicuous populist violations of democracy can seem, we hypothesize that populist violations of democracy will be tolerated to a greater extent than illiberal and authoritarian transgressions.

*H1b: Populist violations of democracy are less likely to be punished by voters than illiberal or authoritarian violations.*

### 3.2 Illiberalism

Broadly speaking, there are two main approaches in the extant scholarship to defining illiberalism: the first one is related to illiberal practices that go against the procedures of liberal democracy and the second considers illiberalism as an ideology. In the former approach, illiberal democracies are defined as political regimes with free elections but without liberal institutions and practices (Zakaria, 1997). According to that strand of literature, illiberal regimes undermine democratic norms, the rule of law and the checks-and-balances mechanisms of horizontal accountability. The latter approach defines illiberalism as a set of political ideas that deny rather the liberal values underpinning modern democracy rather than the liberal democratic procedures per se (Laurelle 2022). In such understanding, illiberalism implies a direct or indirect attack on personal freedom, human rights, pluralism, individualism, tolerance, and dissent. *The Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* (Sajo, Uitz and Holmes eds. 2021), offers this all-encompassing definition: “Illiberalism refers to a set of social, political, cultural, legal, and mental phenomena associated with the waning of individual liberty (personal freedom) as an everyday experience” (Sajo, Uitz and Holmes 2021: xxi).

The fact that illiberalism and populism share common elements, such as a disregard for minority rights, often leads to a blurring of the distinction between these two concepts. However, they differ with respect to the nature of their opposition to liberal democracy. In particular, populism’s opposition to minority rights is a tacit consequence of its argument that the ‘volonté générale’ should be the ultimate guiding principle in democracy, rather than a definitional characteristic. In contrast, illiberalism explicitly dismisses minority rights on the grounds that they are actively deleterious to the national interest. While populists may make use of illiberal arguments or language to frame their opposition to “illegitimate” elite minorities, the two ideologies are conceptually distinct.

Illiberalism is also sometimes conflated with authoritarianism as a result of its advocacy of suppressing dissent, restricting civil society, and limiting political competition. However, there is an important difference of degree in how illiberals and authoritarians realize such shared objectives. Illiberal governments use bureaucratic and legal maneuvers to target their enemies by, for example, cutting public funding or imposing burdensome regulations rather than banning “undesirable” political parties or civil society movements outright. Illiberalism is typically associated with more informal and diffuse practices, while authoritarianism is related to more formal and rigid undemocratic structures (Smilova 2021: 192)

On the other hand, illiberalism does not justify its disregard for liberal democratic principles through a fundamentally democratic rationale. While illiberals may be more subtle than authoritarians in the realm of action, they are concomitantly less subtle than populists in their rhetorical undermining of

democracy. As such, we hypothesize that in polities characterized by a strong baseline preference for liberal democracy, citizens are more likely to punish politicians for illiberal violations than for populist ones.

*H1c: Illiberal violations of democracy are more likely to be punished by voters than populist violations.*

### 3.3 Authoritarianism

Authoritarianism is typically conceptualized as deference to authorities, subordination to the collective, rigid compliance with rules, and placing order and tradition above other values (Mudde, 2007, p. 22-23). Authoritarianism, like populism and illiberalism, poses a challenge to liberal democracy, but it does so in a more overt, deliberate and systematic manner. Populism undermines democratic principles it purports to be upholding by invoking the will of the majority. Illiberalism erodes democratic principles, about which it is at best ambivalent, by exploiting procedural and bureaucratic ambiguities inherent in liberal democracy itself. Authoritarianism approaches democracy from a different perspective, explicitly rejecting both its normative claims to supremacy and the assumed authority of its institutions. In doing so, authoritarianism overtly elevates the rule of a strong leader who is portrayed as rightfully above the law. Rather than attempting to find creative solutions within the formal scope of the liberal-democratic polity, authoritarians unapologetically restrict political freedoms, suppress opposition, and dismantle democratic institutions of oversight and restraint in the name of efficiency (Linz 2000). While populists and illiberals may stoke and tolerate political violence on the part of their supporters, authoritarians stand ready to employ it themselves both to achieve discrete political goals and as a form of legitimation.

We argue that because of their blatant and coercive nature, authoritarian violations of democracy are likely to provoke the strongest backlash from voters habituated to understanding liberal democracy as the political default. Citizens may tolerate or overlook populist and illiberal violations if they are convincingly framed as legally justified within a democratic context, but direct authoritarian crackdowns on the freedoms of the opposition or the integrity of electoral processes are harder to justify in such terms, and are thus more likely to be met with public resistance.

*H1d: Authoritarian violations of democracy will be the most strongly punished by voters compared to populist and illiberal violations.*



## 4 Three dimensions of democracy

According to the minimalist definition of democracy, free and fair elections are the only condition necessary to classify a regime as democratic (Przeworski, 1999). However, most contemporary definitions of democracy, such as those advanced by Dahl (1998) and Møller and Skaaning (2013), use a more extensive set of criteria. While broader definitions differ in detail, they share the same underlying argument that the electoral dimension, which enables decision making through majority rule, is insufficient to protect minorities against what Madison (2003: 72) termed the “superior force of an interested and overbearing majority”. As such, most contemporary theorists of democracy regard counter-majoritarian correctives as intrinsic to a genuinely democratic system.

To protect individuals from the potential tyranny of the majority, the electoral component of democracy must be constrained by institutions and laws. Contemporary liberal democracies place substantial emphasis on the capacity of an independent judiciary to ensure executive actions accord with basic constitutional principles. Additionally, another widely recognized key element of liberal democracies is the protection of civil liberties, including freedom of expression, assembly, and association (Frederiksen, 2022b; Møller and Skaaning, 2013). Hence, Ginsburg and Huq (2018) consider civil rights and the rule of law as two core elements of democracy in addition to competitive elections. Similarly, Ferrín and Kriesi (2025) identify two key components of the liberal democratic model: the electoral one (free and fair elections) and the liberal one (civil liberties and rule of law).

Our empirical strategy thus distinguishes between three modes of violation of liberal democracy – populist, illiberal, and authoritarian – and three distinct core dimensions to be violated – the electoral process, the rule of law, and civil liberties.

As well as being the only component of democracy that all theorists would regard as absolutely definitive of democracy, elections are its most visible and widely understood public manifestation. When people think of democracy, they often think first and foremost of the act of voting. While the rule of law or civil liberties are understood as abstract principles, elections are a concrete event that a majority of the people in most democratic societies directly participate in. Violations of electoral integrity are thus more likely to feel like an attack on the very foundation of democracy itself. We therefore expect that attacks on the electoral aspect of democracy will be more likely to be punished than violations of the rule of law or civil liberties.

*H2: PIA violations of electoral democracy are more likely to be punished than violations of other democratic dimensions.*

## 5 Policy Congruence

Existing research presents mixed findings on whether policy congruence reduces voters’ willingness to punish undemocratic behavior by politicians. While some studies suggest that alignment on policy reduces voters’ willingness to punish undemocratic behavior [Lewandowsky and Jankowski \(2023\)](#); [Serup Christensen and Saikkonen \(2024\)](#), others find that voters still punish transgressions even when they agree with a party’s platform and that there is no strong effect of policy congruence [Frederiksen \(2024\)](#). We build on the existing literature by examining the effects of policy congruence in a multi-country context, and on diverse ways of transgressing democracy (i.e., populist, illiberal, and authoritarian). We expect that when voters are aligned with a party on a policy, punishing that party for democratic backsliding entails a higher cost: the voter may have to choose alternative parties that do not reflect their policy preferences as well in order to save democracy. We, therefore, expect that policy congruence — on both economic and cultural dimensions — will reduce the likelihood that voters sanction parties exhibiting PIA features.

*H3: Citizens will be less likely to punish parties exhibiting PIA features when their policy preferences are congruent with those of the party.*

## 6 Research Design

Our research design utilizes a conjoint experiment embedded in an individual level survey carried out in seven countries: France, Italy, Great Britain, Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Czechia, with a total sample size of 7,000 respondents (1,000 per country), carried out in July 2024 by the Horizon EU [Authlib Research Project](#). These countries represent different levels of democratic backsliding: from the liberal democratic benchmarks of Great Britain, France and Czechia, through Austria and Italy, to the clear backslider cases of Poland and Hungary. For details on the survey and sampling, see Online Appendix A.

In the conjoint experiment, each respondent evaluates nine pairs of parties, enabling us to analyze 63,000 individual choices and assess patterns in voter preferences, as well as the extent to which citizens are willing to support diverse – populist, illiberal, or authoritarian – democratic transgressions. With nine tasks and a maximum number of levels of an attribute set at 4, this design has 98% power to detect an effect size of 0.05% ([Lukac and Stefanelli, 2020](#)).

Participants were presented with two hypothetical party profiles side by side, each characterized by positions on cultural and economic policy (in all three tasks) , as well as one of three dimensions of

democracy: free and fair elections, rule of law, and civil liberties (in separate three tasks - one for each dimension of democracy). The respondent faced three choices in each task. Party stances on democracy varied between populist, illiberal, and authoritarian, with a liberal position serving as a control. Party economic and cultural stances varied between left-wing, centric, and right-wing positions. Table 1 gathers these attributes with their levels and wording.

Task	Dimension	Levels	Wording: We will...
ALL	Economic	Left-wing	Introduce high personal income taxes, collecting more from rich to fund a generous welfare state (e.g. health and educational public services).
		Centrist	Introduce moderate personal income taxes, with the rich paying somewhat more to fund a reasonable welfare state.
		Right-wing	Introduce low personal income taxes, with everybody paying the same rate to fund a minimal welfare state.
ALL	Cultural	Liberal	Accept migrants regardless of the country of origin.
		Centrist	Accept only migrants that can fill important needs in our economy.
		Conservative	Not accept any migrants no matter where they come from.
1	Civil liberties	Populist	Restrict the funding of political organisations that explicitly oppose the will of the people.
		Illiberal	Restrict the funding of political organisations that place the interests of small minorities over the common goals of our country.
		Authoritar.	Ban political organisations that oppose the policies of our government.
		Liberal (Ref.)	Ban political organisations only if they incite violence.
2	Rule of Law	Populist	Fulfill the will of the majority of the people, even if it violates some existing law.
		Illiberal	Contend that a law that does not serve the nation is illegitimate.
		Authoritar.	Remove from office those who would prevent us from renewing our country.
		Liberal (Ref.)	Respect all court rulings even if they go against the implementation of our program.
3	Fair Elections	Populist	Ensure that electoral rules allow the voice of ordinary people to prevail over political elites.
		Illiberal	Ensure that electoral rules do not give power to minorities to prevent us from realising our plans.
		Authoritar.	Ensure that electoral rules allow for a strong leader that does not have to worry about the opposition.
		Liberal (Ref.)	Ensure that electoral rules give all citizens an equal voice.

Table 1: All Attributes and Levels of the Conjoint Experiment

Note: The introduction to the conjoint module was the following: *Imagine that there are parliamentary elections soon in [Country]. In the following, we present you with several comparisons of parties with a significant chance of winning the election. For each of these comparisons, we would like to know which of these two parties (A or B) you would vote for. Please take a close look at the descriptions of the two parties before evaluating them in the next step. The information is provided in the form of a table summarising the different postulates of each party. If you had to choose, which party would you be more likely to vote for? .*

The profiles were fully randomized in a way that participants could sometimes be faced with two undemocratic stances, such as illiberal and populist, between which they had to choose. However, both

profiles in a given choice set always addressed the same democratic dimension (e.g., the rule of law). Figure 1 shows an example of choice in each of the three tasks together with the two outcome variables: ranking (forced choice) and rating of both parties (on a 0-10 scale of support).

This study was preregistered using Open Science Framework prior to receiving the data [here](#). The preregistration includes a comprehensive set of hypotheses related to democratic backsliding. In the current paper, we focus specifically on hypotheses related to the differential effects of populist, illiberal, and authoritarian violations on distinct democratic dimensions. We refined the wording of our hypotheses for clarity, but these refinements did not alter the substantive nature of our predictions or planned analyses (see Online Appendix B for deviations from pre-Analysis Plan..

Following an already standard approach in analyzing conjoint experiments ([Frederiksen, 2024](#); [Bansak et al., 2023](#)), Hainmueller et al. 2014 we use Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) with standard errors clustered at the level of respondent, allowing us to measure the change in probability of a party being chosen when it transgresses democracy in authoritarian, illiberal, and populist ways, relative to our baseline category of liberal democracy. We report Marginal Means in the Online Appendix C. We use pooled models for seven countries but also check in Online Appendix D for main results by countries. if Our primary outcome variable is the binary one resulting from forced choice, but we also check for robustness using rating outcome variable in the Online Appendix E. The results are quite robust to all of these specifications.

In the congruence analysis, we use two different measures: the cultural congruence and the economic congruence. The former combines a measure of individual-level attitudes toward migrants on the cultural dimension ("the [Country]'s cultural life is generally undermined (0) or enriched (10) by people coming to live here from other countries" 11-point scale is recoded into three categories - 0/3="conservative", 4/6="centrist" and 7/10 "liberal") with the three levels of party stances on the cultural attribute in the conjoint experiment. The latter combines individual position on redistribution (level of agreement or disagreement with the statement "Governments should reduce differences in income levels" on a 5-point scale) with the positions of the parties on the economic attribute in the conjoint experiment. Given that there is a significant skew in responses toward greater redistribution, strong agreement with the statement is treated as left-wing position, moderate agreement as a centrist position, and indifference or moderate and strong disagreement as a right-wing position.

#### Example of Task 1: Civil Liberties dimension

Attribute	Party A	Party B
<b>Economic</b>	We will introduce moderate personal income taxes, with the rich paying somewhat more to fund a reasonable welfare state (e.g. health and educational public services).	We will introduce low personal income taxes, with everybody paying the same rate to fund a minimal welfare state (e.g. health and educational public services).
<b>Cultural</b>	We will not accept any migrants, no matter where they come from.	We will accept only those migrants that can fill important needs in our economy.
<b>Civil Liberties</b>	We will ban political organizations that oppose the policies of our government.	We will ban political organizations only if they incite violence.

#### Example of Task 2: Rule of Law dimension

Attribute	Party A	Party B
<b>Economic</b>	We will introduce moderate personal income taxes, with the rich paying somewhat more to fund a reasonable welfare state (e.g. health and educational public services).	We will introduce high personal income taxes, collecting more from rich to fund a generous welfare state (e.g. health and educational public services)
<b>Cultural</b>	We will accept migrants regardless of the country of origin	We will accept only those migrants that can fill important needs in our economy.
<b>Rule of Law</b>	We will fulfill the will of the majority of the people, even if it violates some existing law.	We will respect all court rulings, even if they go against the implementation of our program.

#### Example of Task 3: Free and fair elections dimension

Attribute	Party A	Party B
<b>Economic</b>	We will introduce moderate personal income taxes, with the rich paying somewhat more to fund a reasonable welfare state (e.g. health and educational public services).	We will introduce low personal income taxes, with everybody paying the same rate to fund a minimal welfare state (e.g. health and educational public services).
<b>Cultural</b>	We will not accept any migrants, no matter where they come from.	We will accept only those migrants that can fill important needs in our economy.
<b>Free and fair elections</b>	We will ensure that electoral rules do not give power to minorities to prevent us from realising our plans	We will ensure that electoral rules allow for a strong leader that does not have to worry about the opposition.

If you had to choose, which party would you be more likely to vote for?

☒ ☐ Party A

☐ ☐ Party B

On a scale from 0-10, how much do you support...

Party                      0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Party A                      ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

(Not at all → Very highly)

Party B                      ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

(Not at all → Very highly)

Figure 1: Conjoint Design: Examples of choices in the three tasks

## 7 Results

We initially turn to general results of our conjoint analyses. First, figure 2 demonstrates that citizens generally distinguish between illiberal, populist, authoritarian, and liberal party positions. The figure highlights that citizens tend to punish undemocratic stances in comparison to liberal ones. The extent of this punishment, however, depends both on the democratic dimension at stake and the specific type of democratic violation.

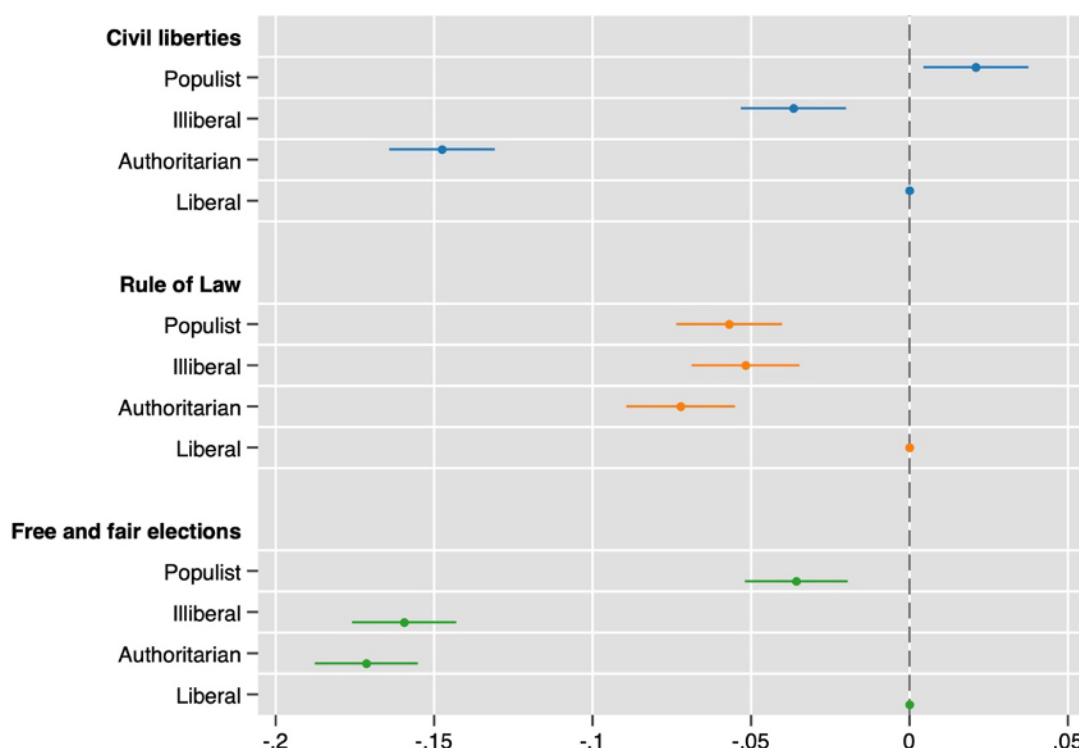


Figure 2: Main Results: AMCEs of deviations from liberal democracy on three different dimensions  
 Note: Economic and Cultural attributes are controlled for, but not shown here. The graph combines coefficients from three distinct tasks, each dedicated to one of the three dimensions of democracy. Ranking (forced choice) outcome variable. Effects for pooled seven countries (Austria, Czechia, Great Britain, Italy, Hungary, France, and Poland).  
 Reference category: “liberal democracy”.

Out of all democratic dimensions, voters punish violations of core majoritarian principle of democracy – free and fair elections – most harshly. Illiberal and authoritarian violations reduce support for the party by approximately 16–17 percentage points. Interestingly, voters do not significantly differentiate between authoritarian and illiberal violations of this dimension. In contrast, voters penalize populist violations of fair elections much less, with only a 4 percentage point reduction in support compared to the liberal stance. This may help explain how politicians who undermine democracy manage to retain public backing by framing their actions as fulfilling the ‘will of the people’.

When it comes to the counter-majoritarian dimension of the rule of law, voters, regardless of the violation type, penalize breaches significantly less than violations of free and fair elections. Populist violations lead to a 6% drop in support, illiberal violations to a 5% drop, and authoritarian violations to about a 7% drop. The fact that authoritarian violations are not punished significantly more than other types is both unexpected and normatively troubling. Perhaps one of the explanations might be that the rule of law principle is more abstract than the other two, and thus its violation harder to identify for broader public. Finally, the fact that the willingness to punish any deviation from the liberal stance of the rule of law does not exceed 10 percent should be of concern, as it suggests insufficient commitment to the principle.

Voters make the clearest distinctions between the three types of violations when considering civil liberties. Authoritarian violations of civil liberties are punished most severely, reducing support by approximately 15 percent, whereas illiberal violations lead to only a 4% decrease. Most strikingly, populist violations of civil liberties not only evade punishment but appear to be mildly rewarded, increasing a party's likelihood of being selected by a few percentage points compared to a party that upholds a liberal democratic stance.

What can we infer from these results? First, voters clearly prioritize electoral fairness over other democratic dimensions, suggesting a hierarchical structure in which violations of this democratic dimension are deemed as more deserving of punishment. Second, contrary to our expectations, citizens do not always punish authoritarian violations more than illiberal ones, particularly when it comes to the rule of law, and free and fair elections. This lack of distinction is normatively concerning, as it suggests that politicians can engage in even the most extreme forms of democratic erosion without necessarily facing greater electoral consequences. Finally, populist attacks on democracy are punished the least and, in the case of civil liberties, are even slightly rewarded. By framing restrictions on civil liberties as measures to protect or benefit the majority, politicians may successfully recast these violations as democratic rather than anti-democratic, reducing electoral backlash or even gaining support. This could explain how undemocratic leaders manage to erode civil liberties without losing too much public backing in some of the countries that have experienced democratic backsliding recently.

## **7.1 Policy Congruence and Willingness to Punish Undemocratic Stances**

In addition to the main results, we further examine the effects of cultural and economic policy congruence on choosing a party with diverse democratic stances. The core question driving this analysis is whether and to what extent voters who agree with a party on its cultural or economic policy are willing

to accept diverse democratic transgressions. This allows us to investigate whether voters are more likely to tolerate undemocratic stances from parties that align with their broader ideological preferences in areas of cultural and economic policy.

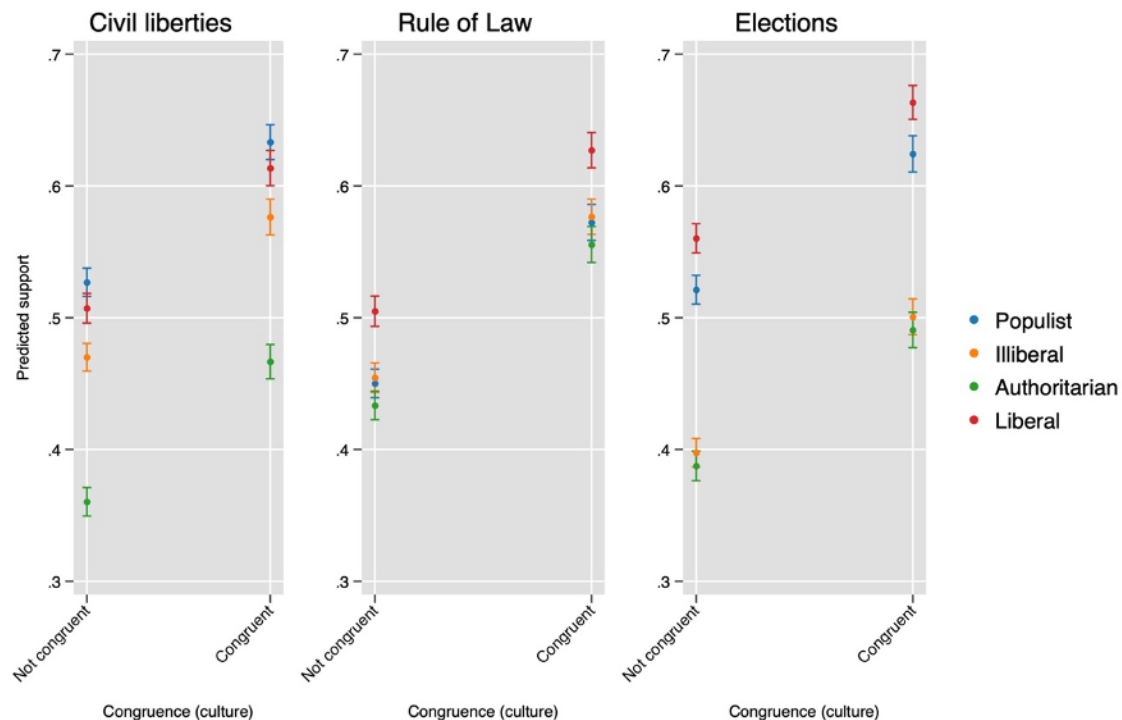


Figure 3: The Effects of Cultural Policy Congruence

Our analysis reveals that cultural congruence between voters and parties significantly enhances predicted support for parties across all democratic dimensions and types of democratic stances. For the dimension of civil liberties, cultural alignment increases support by around 10% for all (un)democratic stances. Interestingly, even with this gain, authoritarian positions remain the least preferred among voters, and in fact authoritarian positions of congruent parties are preferred significantly less than liberal, populist, and illiberal positions of non congruent parties.

For the dimension of the Rule of Law, cultural policy congruence similarly boosts support regardless of the type of violation. However, congruent parties with authoritarian, illiberal, or populist stances, receive higher support than non-congruent parties with a liberal stance. This suggests that voters prioritize cultural policy alignment over adherence to democratic norms when it comes to the dimension of the rule of law.

For the dimension of free and fair elections, congruent illiberal and authoritarian parties remain less



preferred than liberal and populist ones with non-congruent positions, despite gaining approximately 10% in electoral support when culturally aligned with voters. However, the fact that parties with illiberal and authoritarian stances on elections still benefit electorally from cultural congruence shows that cultural congruence makes these stances more palatable to some voters.

Overall, our analysis shows that cultural congruence between voters and parties boosts support across all democratic dimensions with similar magnitude effects (approximately 10-12 percentage points). What makes the results different across different democratic dimensions is rather baseline support. For instance, support for parties with authoritarian stance on civil liberties starts from such a low baseline when incongruent (36%) that even with the boost from cultural congruence (to 46%), they remain less acceptable than non-congruent parties with populist (53%) or liberal positions (51%).

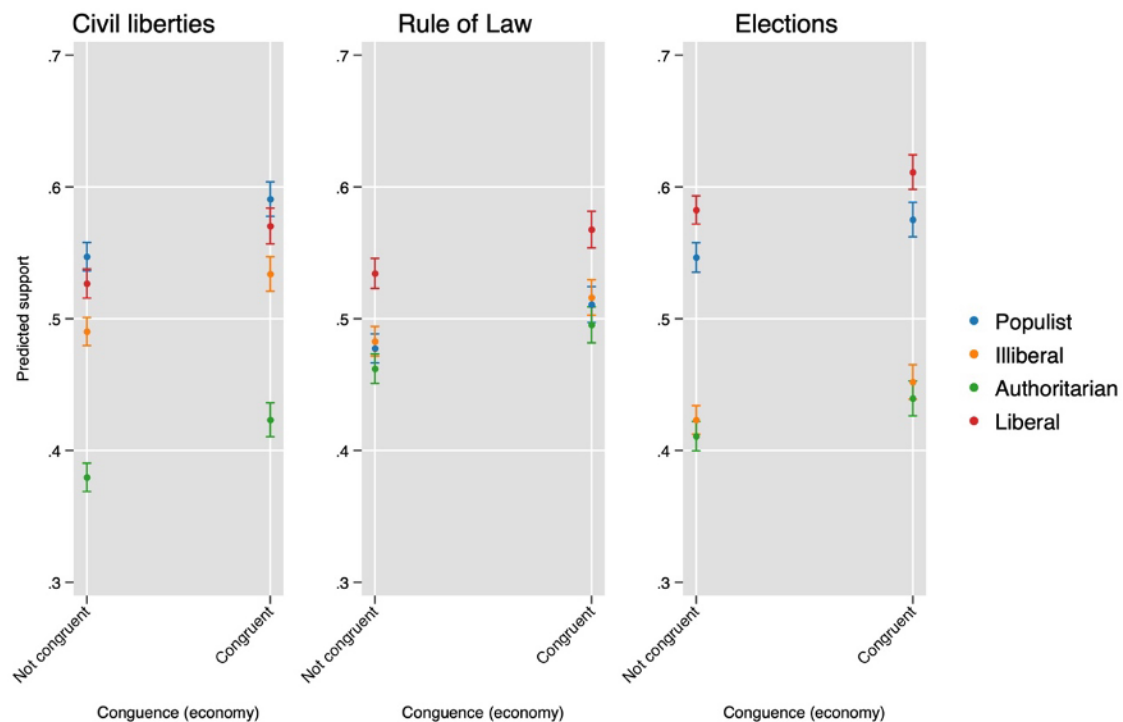


Figure 4: The Effects of Economic Policy Congruence

Now we turn to examine the effects of economic policy congruence on party support across the four (un)democratic party stances and the three dimensions of democracy. Overall, economic congruence produces more modest effects than cultural alignment across all democratic dimensions and violation types. However, there are some differences depending on the type of violation.

For the dimension of civil liberties, parties gain, on average, around 5% for being congruent on eco-

economic policy with voters. Parties with authoritarian positions remain the least preferred, regardless of economic congruence. Economically congruent authoritarian parties remain less supported than incongruent illiberal, populist and liberal parties.

Secondly, concerning the dimension of the rule of law, there is relatively little distinction between undemocratic party stances. While congruence slightly boosts party support, it makes relatively little difference. Interestingly, non-congruent liberal parties remain significantly more supported than undemocratic (populist, illiberal, and authoritarian) congruent parties.

Economic congruence has perhaps the most modest effects when it comes to party stances on the dimension of free and fair elections. While illiberal and authoritarian parties gain a couple of percentage points by aligning with voters on economic policy, they remain far behind populist and liberal parties, regardless of congruence levels. This suggests that non-congruent liberal and populist parties are significantly more supported than congruent illiberal and authoritarian parties.

In summary, we find that economic policy congruence is less likely to make voters tolerate undemocratic parties than cultural policy congruence. Cultural congruence consistently produces stronger effects (10-16 percentage point increases) than economic congruence (4-8 percentage point increases). These findings align with broader political science research suggesting a shift from economic to cultural dimensions as the primary axis of political competition in many democracies, with cultural issues (e.g., immigration) increasingly driving vote choice more than traditional economic left-right positioning (references).

## 8 Conclusions

This article set out to investigate the conditions under which voters accept undemocratic behavior by focusing on different forms of democratic violations. Drawing on a seven-country survey-embedded conjoint experiment, we distinguished between populist, illiberal, and authoritarian forms of undemocratic behavior by political parties and examined their effects on vote choice.

Our findings contribute to the literature on democratic backsliding in several important ways. First, we demonstrated empirically that citizens distinguish between different types of democratic violations, punishing some more readily than others. Namely, we show that voters punish candidates that violate democracy in an authoritarian way most strongly, but in some cases not much more than illiberal viola-

tions. On the other hand, they are the most lenient toward populist violations and in the case of civil liberties, it is even slightly rewarded. This tells us that voters' responses to democratic violations are not uniform and are shaped by the type of violation and the framing surrounding it. This is normatively concerning because it suggests that populist framing may be an effective strategy for undermining democratic principles with minimal political consequences, potentially paving the way for further erosion of democracy. Additionally, when it comes to the voters' commitment to different dimensions of democracy, violations of electoral fairness are consistently more strongly punished than violations of civil liberties and the rule of law. The reason for this can be the centrality of elections in citizens' conceptions of democracy (Ferrín and Kriesi, 2016). A particularly troubling finding arising from this study is that violations to the Rule of Law are punished only moderately and indistinctly across the three forms of deviation from liberal democracy: populist, illiberal, and authoritarian.

Finally, we also show that policy congruence matters to voters, reducing their willingness to punish undemocratic behavior. This effect is stronger for cultural policy congruence than for economic policy congruence, and is consistent for authoritarian, illiberal and populist violations. That congruence reduces electoral punishment even for authoritarian violations is especially concerning because it suggests that even the gravest threats to democracy can become more palatable to voters when accompanied by policy alignment.

In summary, this study advances our understanding of democratic backsliding by highlighting the differentiated ways citizens respond to diverse forms of democratic violations. By showing that not all democratic dimensions are equally valued and that framing significantly influences citizen responses, our findings help explain how democratic erosion can occur despite broad normative support for democracy. To build on our findings, there are several avenues future research can explore. While conjoint experiments offer strong internal validity, they may not fully capture the complex information environments in which voters make decisions. Real-world democratic backsliding typically occurs alongside intensive justification campaigns by political actors, partisan media coverage, and elite cues that may further reduce voter' willingness to punish undemocratic behavior. Future research should examine how different justification strategies by politicians interact with the support for the types of violations we study.

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## A Appendix A: Survey and Samples

The survey was carried out in 7 countries: Poland, Czechia, Austria, France, Great Britain, Hungary, and Italy.

The survey was carried out between 9-29 July 2024:

- in Czechia, France, Great Britain, and Hungary between 09-22.07.2024,
- in Poland between 09-21.07.2024,
- in Austria and Italy between 16-29.07.2024.

Following project objectives, the survey was carried out using the CAWI technique in France, Great Britain, Austria, and Italy. In the remaining three countries, both CAWI and CAPI techniques were used (80% sample + 20% sample).

Four research companies carried out the fieldwork.

In Poland, CAWI technique survey was carried out using Poznaj.to – internet panel operated by PBS. Interviews conducted using the CAPI technique were done by BR (Best Response). In all other countries, CAWI technique survey was carried out using TGM Research online panels. In Czechia and Hungary, CAPI technique survey was conducted by Inquiry. The coordination of the work of all companies involved in the project was handled by PBS.

Quota and random sampling of panelists registered on the panel (separate in each country) was used based on population structure. In a first step, groups of respondents meeting certain demographic criteria were generated, then respondents were drawn to whom the survey invitation was sent. Only those who received an invitation with a link to the survey were able to take part in it.

The survey was carried out on representative samples on the national level with respondents of 16 years of age or older in Austria, and 18 years of age or older in case of the remaining countries i.e. Italy, France, Great Britain, Poland, Czechia, and Hungary.

Samples were constructed based on population structure for the following characteristics: gender, age, education level, size of locality, and region. A person must have been a citizen of the countries covered by the project to be interviewed.

The country samples are reasonably representative as they meet most of the quotas based on population estimates. There is a slight underrepresentation of youngest males, urban dwellers and citizens with basic education but the post-stratification weights (of acceptable magnitude, min. 0.18 / max. 5.5) improve the representativeness to a great degree.

## B Appendix B: Deviations from pre-Analysis plan

This study was preregistered at OSF: [here](#). We follow the pre-analysis plan to the best of our ability. However, some small changes were made to the wording of the hypotheses for the sake of clarity.

First, while hypothesis H1d (Authoritarian violations of democracy will be the most strongly punished by voters compared to populist and illiberal violations) was not included in the PAP, it is logically equivalent to the following two that were included: H1b (Parties with populist features will be less likely to be punished from deviating from liberal democratic norm than parties with illiberal or authoritarian features) and H1c (Parties with illiberal features will be less likely to be punished from deviating from liberal democratic norm than parties with authoritarian features).

Second, hypothesis H2 (PIA violations of electoral democracy are more likely to be punished than violations of other democratic dimensions) simplifies the following preregistered hypotheses: "H9. Parties with PIA features will be punished to a greater degree for deviating from the liberal democratic norms on the free and fair elections dimension than on the civil liberties dimension (H9a) and, even more so, than on the rule of law one (H9b)."

Third, hypothesis H3 (Citizens will be less likely to punish parties exhibiting PIA features when their policy preferences are congruent with those of the party) follows the logic of the preregistered "H5. Citizens will be less likely to punish parties with PIA features if the economic stances of these parties align with their own. H6. Citizens will be less likely to punish parties with PIA features if the views on immigration of these parties align with their own."

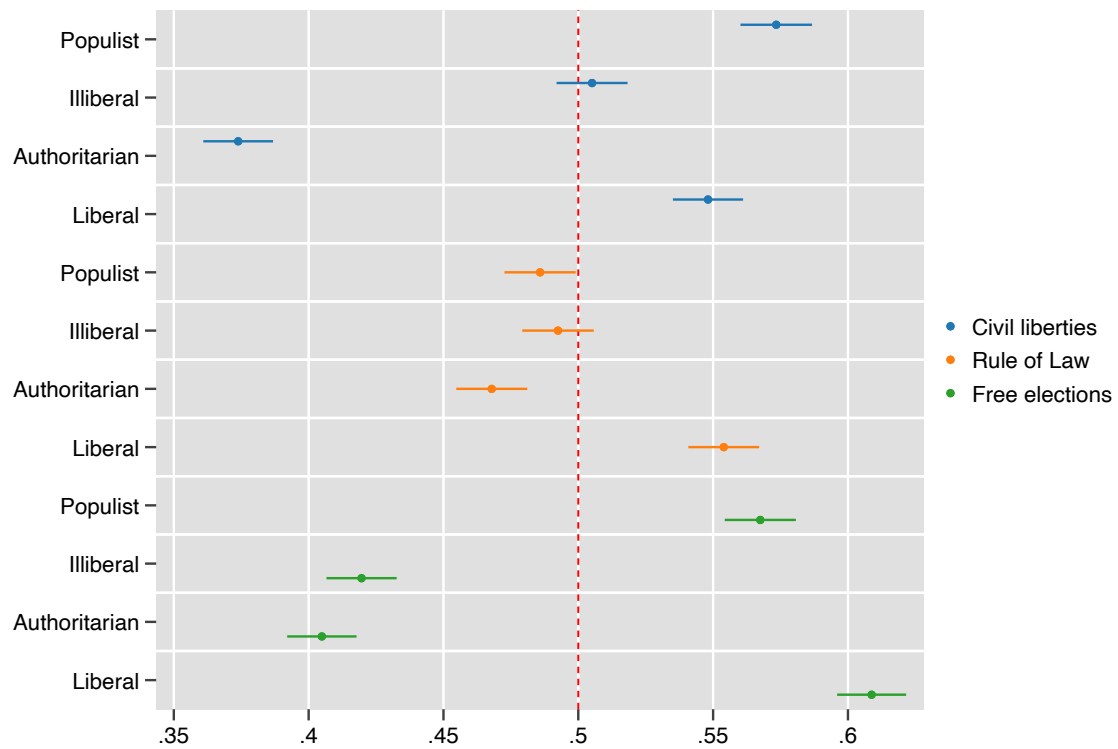


Figure 5: Main Effects: Marginal Means

## C Appendix C: Marginal Means plot of main results



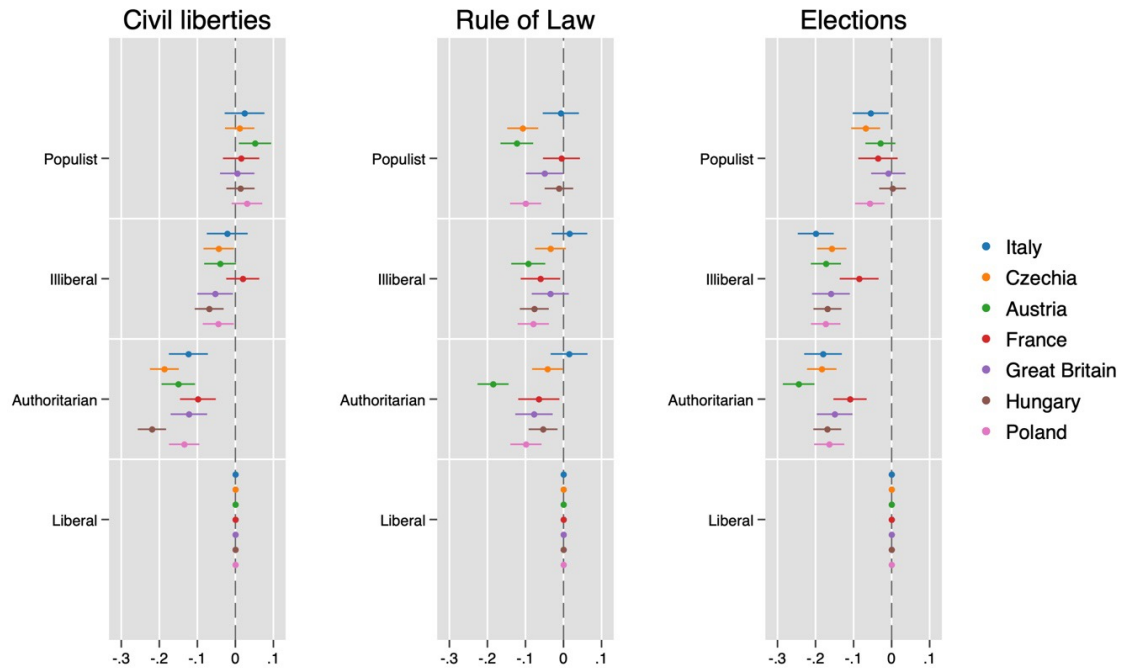


Figure 6: AMCEs of main results by countries

## D Appendix D: AMCEs plot of main results by countries

## E AMCE Plot for Party Rating

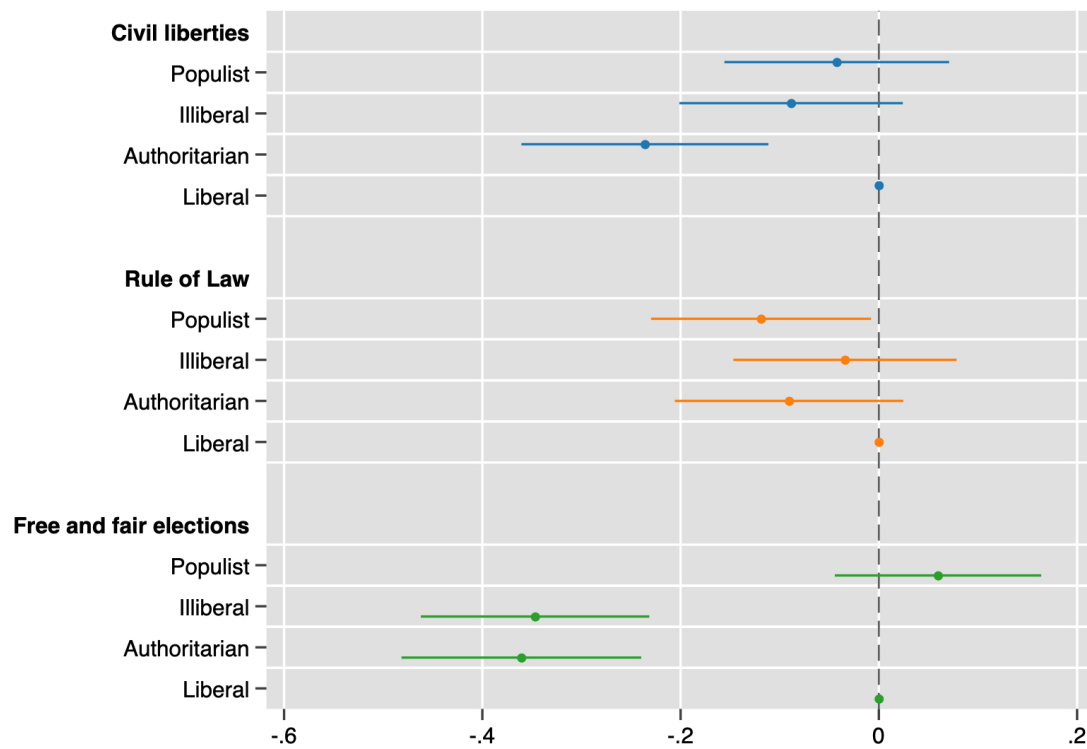


Figure 7: Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) on Party Rating