

Migrants and just-noticeable differences in meso-level democratic values

Abstract

People disagree about what type of democracy is best. Often this is because there are trade-offs between meso-level democratic values. For example: democracies with proportional electoral systems fairly translate votes into seats, but have weak links between electoral success and participation in government (Kam et al., 2020). Given such trade-offs, political scientists have either maintained value neutrality, limiting themselves to identifying these conflicts, or have argued for the primacy of certain democratic values, thereby risking divergence between expert preferences and views in the general population. Limited use has been made of appeals to public opinion, since public knowledge of different types of democracy is often limited. This project studies beliefs and opinions of one population group which is well-qualified to evaluate different democracies: migrants. Migrants – particularly adult migrants from democratic countries – often participate actively in the politics of both their origin and host countries (Peltoniemi, 2018). They can therefore make informed comparisons between levels of proportionality, government identifiability, accountability, promissory and descriptive representation in their origin and host countries. By modelling comparisons between countries as a function of objective or intersubjective “ground truth” measures corresponding to these values in both countries, we establish which differences are “just-noticeable differences” (JNDs): the difference in the ground truth measure such that survey respondents detect a difference at least half the time. JNDs allow us to make normative claims about democratic trade-offs if differences which are alike in being “just-noticeable” are alike in normative weight. Migrants from countries with different institutional forms (different electoral system, different form of government) are also able to express preferences between institutional forms, and act as informed observers (Mill, 1863/1987). By studying JNDs in the realization of meso-level democratic values, and preferences over institutional forms, our project uses migrant knowledge to sharpen our understanding of democracy.

B1 Aims and background of the research proposed

Democracy is animated by multiple conflicting values. These conflicts are ubiquitous at the macro-level, where values cluster into different models of democracy, whether liberal, egalitarian or participatory (Coppedge et al., 2016). Yet conflict is equally ubiquitous at the meso-level of institutional design in *representative* democracies. Different countries use different electoral systems (Bormann & Golder, 2022) and forms of government. No system might be the single best overall, but one system might be acknowledged as best at realizing one particular value. For example: majoritarian electoral systems are often defended on the grounds that they maximize voters' ability to remove unsatisfactory governments ("kicking the rascals out"), and that this meso-level value should carry great weight when evaluating representative democracies (Pinto-Duschinsky, 1999).

Given conflict, political scientists can:

- *avoid* arguments about meso-level values, and give conditional recommendations for institutional choice/reform ("if you want more proportionality, you should adopt larger multi-member electoral districts"). This preserves an idea of value-free social science (M. Weber, 1989, pp. 25–26) but leaves political scientists unable to say whether increasing proportionality is good *all things considered*.
- *sidestep* argument about meso-level values and assess whether institutions promote outcomes that (almost) everyone regards as an unqualified good. Political scientists might recommend parliamentary systems over presidential systems because parliamentarism is robustly associated with lower infant mortality (Gerring et al., 2009), and no-one thinks higher infant mortality has offsetting advantages. This merely relocates the normative disagreement to a different level.
- *engage* in normative arguments, benefitting from greater knowledge of alternative institutional forms, but creating a risk that their judgements will be seen as reflecting the underlying partisan or socioeconomic interests of a "Brahmin left" (Piketty, 2020).

We propose a new way of resolving conflicts between meso-level democratic values and choosing institutional forms. In democracies public opinion plays an important normative role. However, public opinion on institutional choice is inchoate: most members of the public have limited interest in the institutions of their *own* polity, still less alternative institutions. We therefore appeal to public opinion amongst one population group which does have experience of multiple political systems. Migrants – particularly adult migrants from democratic countries – often participate actively in the politics of both their origin and host countries (Peltoniemi, 2018). They are well placed both to evaluate host and origin countries' performance in respect of different values, and (for migrants from countries with different institutional forms) to evaluate different institutional forms. These lived experiences are a firmer basis for comparison than fictive experiences of participants in lab-based experiments (Bol et al., 2023).

We survey migrants to answer two related questions.

First, we investigate whether migrants equally familiar with both host and origin countries *generally* prefer different institutional forms. We ask about preferences regarding form of executive (presidential, parliamentary, or semi-presidential) and the electoral system (majoritarian, proportional or mixed-member). To prevent negative/positive affect towards host countries from colouring responses, we ask this question two different ways: whether the *host* country would be better off if it adopted the origin country's institutional form; and whether the *origin* country would be better off if it adopted the host country's institutional form. Migrant preferences are normatively important because migrants are familiar with both forms, and because “familiarity with both objects of choice” is commonly regarded as a necessary basis for exercising competent prudential, ethical, or aesthetic judgement. Famously, for Mill ([1863/1987](#)), “the test of quality... [is] the preference felt by those who... are best furnished with the means of comparison” (283). Migrants are good “Millian observers”.

Preferences regarding institutional forms matter, but can only tell us about discrete institutional choices. We cannot use these preferences to evaluate reforms involving differences of degree rather than differences of kind – for example, the suggestion that proportional representation works best with small districts electing three to five representatives each (Carey & Hix, [2011](#)).

We therefore also ask migrants whether their host or origin countries better demonstrate different meso-level democratic values (and electoral democracy overall). The particular meso-level values we ask about are:

- government identifiability (Hanretty, [2023](#))
- accountability (Kam et al., [2020](#))
- proportionality (Gallagher, [1991](#))
- congruence (Golder & Stramski, [2010](#))
- minority protection, particularly with reference to protection through the courts (Ginsburg et al., [2018](#))
- promissory representation (Naurin et al., [2019](#); Pitkin, [1967](#)), and
- descriptive representation (Pitkin, [1967](#)).

Political scientists have developed objective or intersubjective measures which assess the degree to which these values are realized in practice. For example: descriptive representation can be assessed by comparing the proportion of women in parliament to the proportion in the (adult) population. We call these our “ground truth” measures. Given such measures, and subjective judgements as to which country better exemplifies a value (or whether they are indistinguishable), we can derive the “just-noticeable difference” (JND): the difference in the ground truth measure at which survey respondents correctly identify the better performing country at least half the time. JNDs can be used to *commensurate* different values. For Edgeworth ([1881](#)), it was a “first principle incapable of proof” that the “minimum sensible” or “just perceptible increment” of all pleasures is equitable.

Our analysis of the comparative judgements of migrants will suggest how different goals should be traded-off, but it does not tell us whether particular recommendations for institutional choice will gain public support. In the final part of our project, we test whether recounting migrants’ experiences of alternative institutional forms has a causal effect on

support for reform. We recontact UK migrant survey participants to discuss their views on institutional reform, and use this as the basis for a survey experiment which shows a random subset of non-migrant respondents these experiential arguments or a control condition.

Our research aims are therefore embodied in six work packages as follows:

WP1. To survey current and return migrants in the four fieldwork countries (Canada, Poland, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and ask them to judge which country (country of origin/former host country or fieldwork country) performs better in terms of seven meso-level democratic principles (government identifiability, accountability, congruence, proportionality, minority protection, promissory representation, and descriptive representation) and in terms of its overall level of democracy

WP2. To ask current and return migrants from a country with a different institutional configuration to the fieldwork country whether (i) the fieldwork country and (ii) their country of origin/former host country would do better if they adopted this alternative institutional configuration

WP3. To compile information on the degree to which electoral democracies around the world do in fact realise the seven meso-level democratic principles mentioned above, and the principle of electoral democracy

WP4. To create “just-noticeable differences” for the seven meso-level democratic principles and overall level of democracy

WP5. To determine whether particular institutional forms are generally preferred by migrants equally familiar with both forms

WP6. To test whether migrants’ experiential arguments for institutional choice cause greater support for those choices in non-migrant populations

B1.1 Fit with TAP themes

This research falls within with TAP theme 4.1 (“Concepts, understandings and models of democracy, governance and trust”). It specifically tackles the meso-level identified in the call, and explicitly addresses the “links to electoral democracy [and] political accountability” also mentioned there. It is also focused on “structures” and “democratic institutions”, which can be reformed by legislative action, rather than sticky and slowly-changing behavioural factors affecting democratic challenges.

Our research also falls within TAP theme 4.7 (“Epistemologies, knowledge and expertise”). We start from the epistemic advantage enjoyed by one particular population group – and moreover a population group (migrants) which is often marginalised. This epistemic advantage is a form of implicit knowledge regarding their origin and host countries. Because we go back to survey respondents and invite them to contribute arguments for institutional reform, we co-produce research, testing whether migrant voices are heard when they make experiential arguments for institutional reform.

B1.2 Relationship to TAP objectives

This plan of work corresponds closely to the objectives of the TAP call. First, it “innovate[s] our conceptualization of democracy” by making clear the trade-offs between meso-level values found in representative democracy. The *existence* of these trade-offs has been made clear before, but no researcher so far has been able to show satisfactorily the shape of this trade-off, either empirically or normatively. We do not expect our answer to these questions to be the last word on these trade-offs, but we do regard it as a major step forward, and one capable of shifting the debate on democratic practice from questions about whether trade-offs exist to how critical they are.

Second, our research “*empirically define[s] and describe[s]* the challenges... relevant to democracy” from a “contemporary perspective”. We match subjective judgements with “ground truth” measures of how well different democracies realize different meso-level values.

Third, our research offers a methodologically diverse and cross-national perspective. To our knowledge, ours will be the first study to apply the concept of just-noticeable differences to the study of political outcomes. It thereby profits from a rich strand of literature in psychology and ethics, discussed more fully in §3.1.

Fourth, it tests a possible intervention – sharing migrant experiences – “aimed at enhancing democratic processes”. Whilst large-scale institutional reforms are uncommon, there is value in understanding which arguments move people (Loewen et al., 2012).

Finally, our research is a form of co-production of knowledge with a particular community – the community of current and former migrants. We view our project as a way of harnessing the epistemic advantage of that community to produce a better understanding of democracy and its tensions.

B2 Methodology of the research proposed

B2.1 JNDs

A key component of our research is the elicitation of just-noticeable differences (JNDs) for meso-level democratic values. JNDs are usually elicited by repeatedly presenting participants with different sets of stimuli, with respondents either forced to choose one higher rated stimulus, or allowed to state that the alternatives cannot be distinguished. Where respondents can be presented with multiple stimuli sets, accurate inferences are possible with a small number of respondents. For example: one study of JNDs in the saltiness of foods presented just 50 respondents with seven stimuli sets (Drake et al., 2011).

We can only “present” migrant respondents with one stimuli set, with two alternatives (the country of residence and *either* the country of origin, for current migrants, *or* the former country of residence, for “former” or “return” migrants). Though some individuals have worked

or studied in multiple countries, such individuals are rare, and the implementation costs of eliciting comparative judgements between three countries are prohibitive.

Because we can only ask each respondent about two alternatives, our study uses many more respondents than is typical in JND research in psychology or marketing. We have also designed our response format to ensure maximally informative responses: we allow respondents to indicate that the two countries are indistinguishable with respect to the value we ask about, but we also allow them to express greater or lesser confidence in their judgements. These two steps allow us to estimate JNDs precisely despite the fact that each respondent is only comparing two alternatives per value.

Box 1 gives an example for promissory representation. We begin by asking respondents about the level of promissory representation in the fieldwork country. We ask this question first to guard against “response substitution” (Graham & Coppock, 2021), where respondents dissatisfied with the level of democracy in the fieldwork country rate it poorly if asked to compare immediately. We then ask respondents to make a comparative judgement between the fieldwork country and the country of origin/former country of residence.

i Box 1: Example question for promissory representation.

Q1: Thinking about the last couple of elections in [FIELDWORK COUNTRY], to what extent would you agree with the following statement: “Parties in government generally do what they promised before the election”

- strongly disagree
- disagree
- neither agree nor disagree
- agree
- strongly agree

Q2: Thinking about the last couple of elections in [COUNTRY OF ORIGIN/FORMER COUNTRY OF RESIDENCE], would you say parties are better at keeping promises in [COUNTRY OF ORIGIN/FORMER COUNTRY OF RESIDENCE], or better at keeping promises in [FIELDWORK COUNTRY]?

- Much better at promise-keeping in [COUNTRY OF ORIGIN]
- Somewhat better at promise-keeping in [COUNTRY OF ORIGIN]
- About the same in both countries
- Somewhat better at promise-keeping in [FIELDWORK COUNTRY]
- Much better at promise-keeping in [FIELDWORK COUNTRY]

Where a large number of respondents evaluate the same stimuli, it is possible to study directly which pairs of stimuli are successfully distinguished more than half of the time. If forty of fifty respondents rate food A as saltier than food B, this is good evidence that the JND is smaller than the difference in salt between the two samples. Where there are relatively few comparisons involving the same stimuli, we have to model the responses, and approach the issue of the JND more indirectly.

Because we have ordered responses (much better, somewhat better, etc.,), we use an ordinal logistic regression with a single predictor – the difference in the ground truth variable between fieldwork and origin countries. An ordinal logistic regression has a series of different ordered intercepts for each of the response categories, such that higher response categories require a larger difference between fieldwork and origin countries.

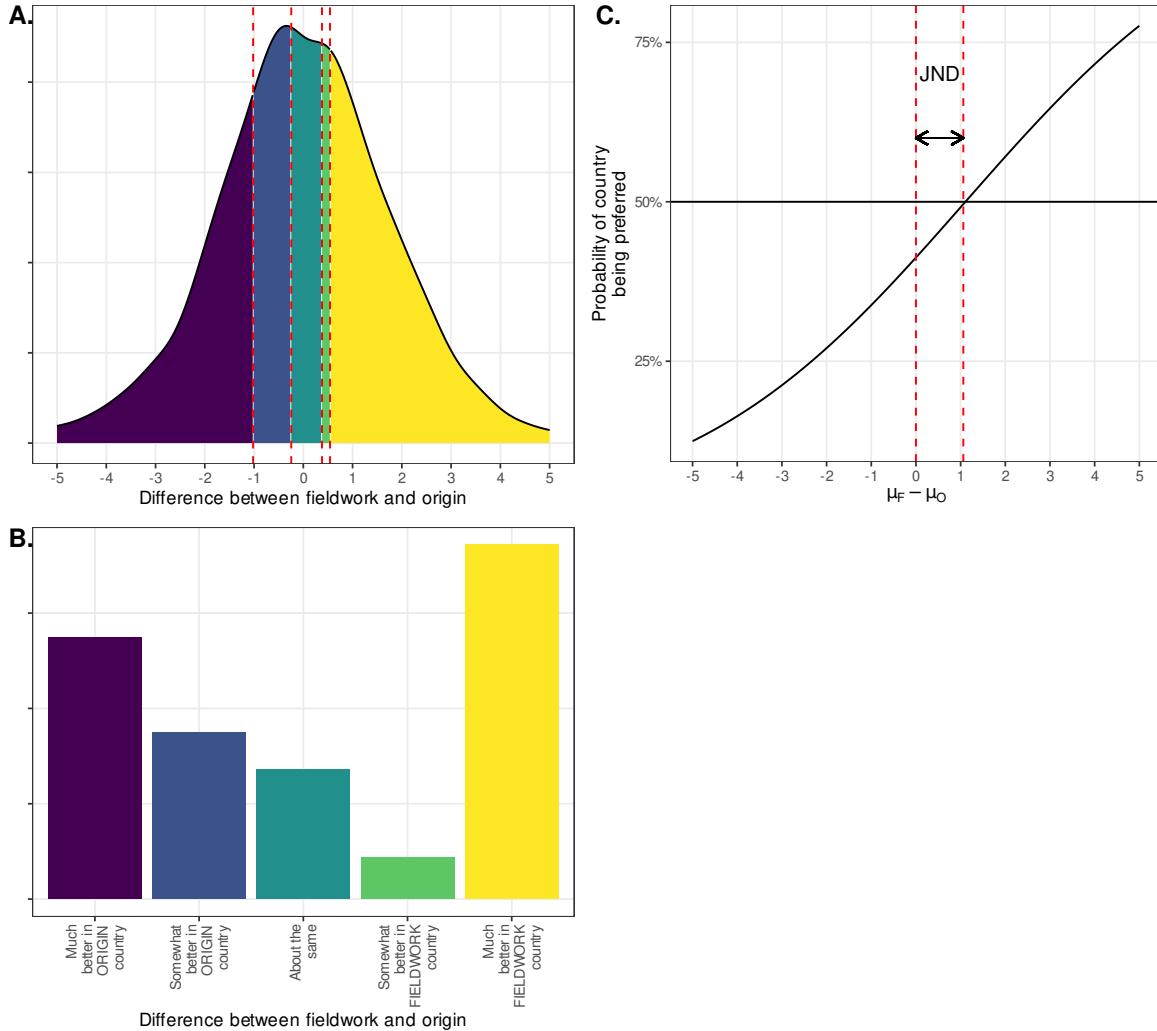


Figure 1: Illustrative plots of distribution of underlying differences in ground truth (panel A), realized survey responses (panel B), and predicted probabilities of exceeding the ‘about the same’ category (panel C.)

After estimating this model, we can work out the just-noticeable difference. Recall that this is the smallest difference at which the probability of the larger stimulus being correctly identified is equal to or greater than fifty percent. Figure 1 shows how this works for simulated data. The fieldwork country is (correctly) chosen by respondents when the difference between the fieldwork and origin country is just over one unit (panel C).

Unless all respondents say all countries are exactly the same, the model always recovers

some JND. Where respondents are poor judges of the concepts involved, it will take big differences in the ground truth to shift responses, and the JND will be large (equivalently, the slope in panel C will be shallow). Where respondents are good judges, JNDs will be smaller. One goal of the project is to identify which values are associated with small just noticeable differences.

This model is the simplest model for eliciting the JND. It is possible to extend the model to allow for order effects (e.g., respondents are more likely pick the country of origin regardless of true differences), or for country-specific effects (e.g., Canada is more often picked than it should be given its performance). It is also possible to model the scale of the threshold parameters as a function of respondent characteristics such as their level of knowledge. We estimate these models using the `brms` package for R (Bürkner, 2017), which allows us easily to summarize the posterior distribution of the JND rather than producing a single point estimate.

B2.2 Survey

To elicit JNDs we need to survey current or former migrants. Our inferences are more valid the more migrant opinions are similar to individuals alike in all important respects save for their migration background. For this reason we additionally survey non-migrants to establish whether their evaluations of meso-level democratic values are systematically harsher or more generous than the evaluations of migrants. In this section we describe the structure of the survey (see Figure 2), before going on to discuss issues of question wording.

The survey starts with filter questions which ask respondents whether they were born in the fieldwork country, or whether if not they have worked or studied abroad in another country for three or more years. Current migrants (i.e., those not born in the fieldwork country) will be asked for their country of birth, and say how long they have lived in the fieldwork country. Former migrants will be asked to identify the country in which they spent most time, and say how long they lived there.

We restrict our analysis of migrants to migrants from democratic countries. By democratic countries, we mean countries with an average score over the past ten years of at least 0.4 on the V-Dem project's electoral democracy index (Baltz et al., 2022). We exclude migrants from non-democratic countries because (i) they may not be able to answer questions about electoral processes where no electoral processes exist, and because (ii) comparing across democratic and non-democratic regimes increases the risk that respondents will use the same words to mean different things (Ariely & Davidov, 2011).

Respondents are then asked to make a series of evaluations concerning overall levels of democracy and their realization of the seven meso-level democratic values we specify above. Above we gave an example of this kind of question for one particular democratic value (promissory representation). Table 1 lists the question wordings for levels of electoral democracy and for the remaining seven meso-level democratic values. Non-migrants will be asked about the fieldwork country; migrants will also be asked to make a comparative evaluation.

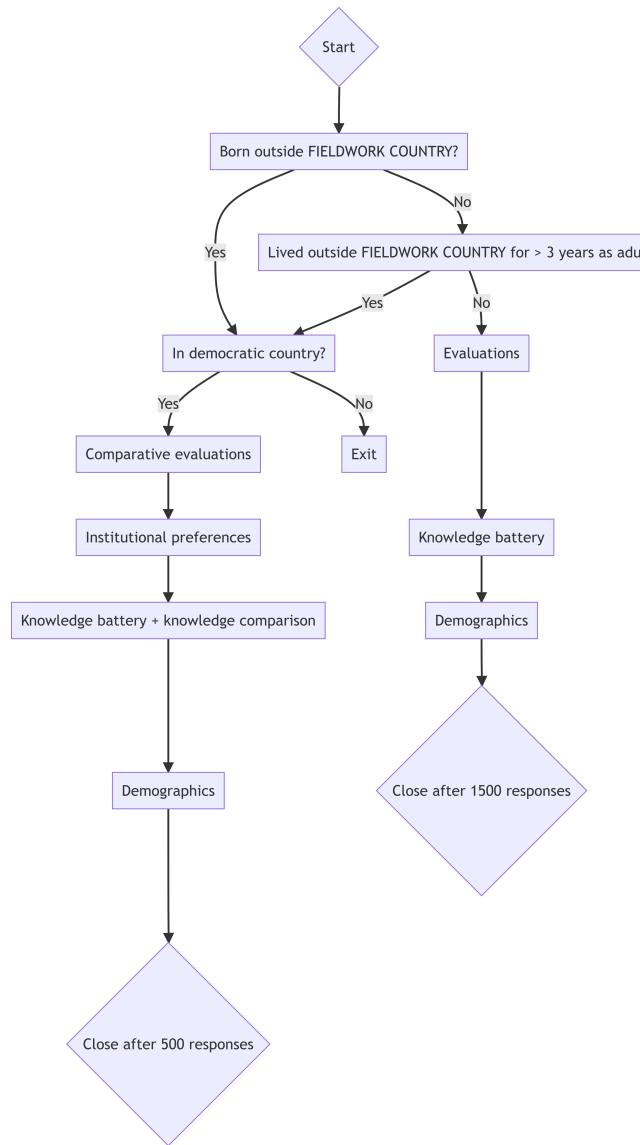


Figure 2: Survey flow-chart.

Table 1: Example survey questions

Value	Question	Responses
Democracy	Thinking about the past fifteen years, to what extent would you agree with the following statement: "FIELDWORK COUNTRY is a democracy where there are regular free and fair elections"	<i>Likert agreement</i>
Identifiability	Thinking about the last couple of elections in FIELDWORK COUNTRY, would you say that you knew which party or parties would form the government as soon as you knew the election results, or did you find it harder?	<i>Very easy / quite easy / quite hard / very hard</i>
Accountability	Thinking about the last couple of elections in FIELDWORK COUNTRY, to what extent would you agree with the following statement: "It's easy to get rid of parties in government that aren't doing a good job"	<i>Likert agreement</i>
Proportionality	Thinking about the last couple of elections in FIELDWORK COUNTRY, to what extent would you agree with the following statement: "The number of seats each party wins in [NATIONAL/FEDERAL LEGISLATURE] is a fair reflection of the number of votes they get"	<i>Likert agreement</i>
Congruence	Thinking about the last couple of elections in FIELDWORK COUNTRY, to what extent would you agree with the following statement: "The views of the average member of [NATIONAL/FEDERAL LEGISLATURE] are a good match to the views of the average person in the country"	<i>Likert agreement</i>
Minority protection	Thinking about the past fifteen years, to what extent would you agree with the following statement: "FIELDWORK COUNTRY is a country where the court system treats everyone fairly"	<i>Likert agreement</i>
Promissory representation	Thinking about the last couple of elections in FIELDWORK COUNTRY, to what extent would you agree with the following statement: "Parties in government generally do what they promised before the election"	<i>Likert agreement</i>
Descriptive representation	Thinking about the last couple of elections in FIELDWORK COUNTRY, to what extent would you agree with the following statement: "[NATIONAL/FEDERAL LEGISLATURE] holds up a mirror to society: people whether young or old, male or female, black or white are represented in proportion to their presence in the adult population"	<i>Likert agreement</i>

The next section is only answered by a subset of migrants. Migrants from a country where the electoral system or form of government is of a different type to the type used in the fieldwork country are asked whether the fieldwork country would be better off adopting the alternative form, and are then asked the question in the reverse about their country of origin. We do not ask non-migrants these questions because some of the institutional forms are hard to explain to individuals who lack knowledge of them.

We then ask respondents to complete a knowledge battery formed of six cross-nationally comparable questions, together with an exhortation to answer honestly (Clifford & Jerit, 2016). Migrant respondents are additionally asked to give subjective assessments of their levels of knowledge in *both* the fieldwork country and their country of origin/country of former residence. Asking these questions allows us, in subsequent analyses, to exclude current or former migrants whose connection to their countries of birth/countries of former residence is minimal.

Finally, we collect demographic information on all respondents. This allows us to weight responses to the relevant populations, and to match migrants to the most similar non-migrant respondent in follow-up analyses.

B2.3 Ground truths

The survey allows us to elicit comparative judgements about democratic values, but to assess which differences are noticeable we need to measure the degree to which these values are actually exemplified in democratic countries globally. We use the following measures:

- **democracy:** the “electoral democracy” index produced by the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al., 2016);
- **proportionality:** the average value of the Gallagher index of disproportionality (Gallagher, 1991) averaged over the last three elections
- **identifiability:** the entropy of predicted probabilities of coalition formation (Hanretty, 2023), averaged over the last three legislative terms
- **accountability:** the seat-share weighted ratio of change in cabinet portfolio share divided by change in vote share of incumbent parties (Kam et al., 2020)
- **congruence:** the distance on the left-right scale between the average (mean) legislator and the average survey respondent (Golder & Stramski, 2010)
- **minority protection:** the V-Dem project’s “Equality before the law and individual liberty” index (v2xcl_r01) (Coppedge et al., 2016)
- **descriptive representation:** the disproportionalities (measured by the Gallagher index) between the proportion of the population and the proportion of lower-chamber legislators who belong to two cross-nationally comparable demographic groups [gender groups, age groups], averaged over the last three legislative terms
- **promissory representation:** an extension of Thomson et al. (2017) for the twelve countries included in that study

Not all ground truth measures are available for all countries. Whereas V-Dem measures are available for all countries, our measure of promissory representation requires time-consuming additional data to be collected, and we can only promise coverage for the six most common countries of origin in each fieldwork country (see §5.4 for more details). Similarly, our measure of congruence is based on over 200 national election studies which ask respondents to place themselves *and parties* on a (comparable) left-right scale, which covers *most* but not all electoral democracies likely to feature in our survey.

B2.4 Experimental tests of experiential arguments

Our final method is an experimental test of experiential arguments for institutional reform. We recontact UK survey respondents and ask to discuss their views on institutional reform. Based on an unstructured interview, we write a short script (< 250 words) which summarises their migration history, their experience of the different institution, and what they find most persuasive. We recruit an actor to perform this script. We test the effect of this recorded script on support for institutional reform in a follow-up survey. We compare the effect of the experiential argument to a non-experiential argument (a video segment recorded by the same actor, but with a UK accent and with no mention of any immigration background) and a control (a video segment discussing arguments for organ donation).

B3 Position in the context of existing research

B3.1 Just-noticeable differences

The concept of the just-noticeable difference (JND) originates in psychophysics (Fechner, 1860; E. Weber, 1934/1978). Earlier work in psychophysics tried to identify a single JND for each type of stimulus: psychologists at the time hoped to identify *the* JND for light, for pitch, and so on. More recent work in psychophysics (Laming, 1973) suggests that JNDs are at least partly context-dependent.

Early work by Weber and Fechner directly inspired early utilitarians who hoped to identify the just-noticeable difference in terms of utility, and thereby make different sorts of pleasures commensurable (Edgeworth, 1881). This has led some to suggest a perception-theoretic approach to utilitarianism (Argenziano & Gilboa, 2019; Ng, 1975), although such authors place more emphasis on the way just-noticeable differences vary between individuals rather than the way they vary across activities (e.g., a rich person may not notice a loss of \$100 but a poor person will). Although these perception-theoretic arguments are highly abstract, more practical applications of the JND occur in medicine, where some studies base the “minimal clinically important difference” (MCID) on the smallest difference, for any outcome of interest, that patients can detect (Jaeschke et al., 1989).

The use of JNDs has been attacked on the grounds that it fails to deal with cumulative processes and with outcomes that are valued at least partly for their consequences. Concerning cumulative processes: Luce (1956) noted that consumers are unlikely to have a

preference between a cup of coffee with no sugar, and a cup of coffee with one grain of sugar: the additional sugar is well below the just noticeable difference for sugar in solution. Yet at the same time consumers can have strong preferences between cups of coffee with varying amounts of sugar even where these have been added one grain at a time. This can be viewed as a particular application of the sorites paradox. As far as partly instrumentally valuable quantities are concerned, although it is possible to establish just-noticeable differences in how clear the air looks (Henry, 2002), our interest in clear air is partly intrinsic (we value being able to see through the air and disvalue smog) and partly instrumental (we value clear air because lower levels of particulate matter cause fewer breathing difficulties). It would therefore be wrong to limit air pollution to less than just-noticeable levels, since this might fail to account for long-term consequences of polluted but visibly clear air. Fortunately neither of these issues applies to political outcomes: our seven meso-level values are valued intrinsically in the here and now rather than for their long-term consequences.

B3.2 Expert opinion

We ask migrants their views because they are familiar with different polities – but so too are political scientists. There have been several studies of expert opinion regarding the desirability of different electoral systems overall and with respect to their likely consequences. Bowler et al. (2005) and Carey et al. (2013) both report the results of surveys of experts regarding electoral systems and the prioritization of electoral system objectives. The experts surveyed in Bowler et al. (2005) ranked seven different electoral system types. Of these, mixed member proportional was the best ranked on average and was also a Condorcet winner. Single member plurality was ranked sixth, ahead of run-off systems, single non-transferable vote, and mixed member majoritarian. Experts were also asked to rank “desirable properties” of electoral systems. Of these, “proportionality of outcome” and “helps ensure stable government” were the highest ranked, with accountability [“allows voters to ‘kick the rascals out’”] ranked fifth. The survey reported in Carey et al. (2013) gave a very different ordering of priorities, with the individual accountability of legislators ranked first, followed by stability of government. Linhart et al. (2023) speculate that the divergence “can be a direct effect of the consulted experts – APSA members in the case of Carey et al., a broader group (PSA, APSA, and IPSA members) in the study by Bowler and colleagues”.

These studies have done three things: they have identified (i) which electoral systems are generally preferred, (ii) which electoral systems are thought better for particular meso-level values, and (iii) have identified (partly overlapping but partly inconsistent) relative orderings of meso-level values. Achievement (i) is helpful, but may result from the different (national or economic) contexts in which academics find themselves. Achievement (ii) helps us if we are told directly to design a system to maximize a particular value, but this is rare. Achievement (iii) only helps us if the ordering of priorities is a lexical ordering, such that no reform can worsen a higher level priority to achieve an improvement in a lower level priority, no matter how large that improvement is; or we make some assumptions about what an equal amount of government accountability or proportionality is, such that an equal amount of a higher-rated priority is to be preferred to an equal amount of a lower-rated priority. This task of equating different meso-level values is of course precisely what we want to achieve in

this project. Our argument therefore is that existing studies of expert opinion cannot fully address the question of how to trade-off meso-level democratic values.

B3.3 Public opinion

Testing popular opinion on electoral systems and meso-level democratic values is difficult, for reasons already discussed – but we can distinguish between studies of informed citizens participating in deliberative publics (or other educational contexts) and studies of the general population.

Deliberative publics have typically favoured more proportional electoral systems. This was true of Canadian deliberative publics; the Dutch deliberative public never addressed the issue of the proportionality of the Dutch electoral system, preferring to focus on the within-party dimension (Fournier, 2011). Concerning the general population: there are studies of public opinion in systems which have experienced reform (New Zealand; France) which conclude that partisan advantage is the factor which best explains electoral system preference (Blais et al., 2015; Jou, 2013). This contrasts with lab-based work (Bol et al., 2023), which suggests that preferences are driven by attitudes towards equality.

There are also experimental or quasi-experimental studies of public opinion which explicitly tackle trade-offs. These studies (Linhart et al., 2023; Plescia et al., 2020) reveal that citizens do value most of the meso-level democratic values discussed above. However, the main problem with these studies is that they have to describe outcomes in broad and non-specific terms to participants. Thus, although respondents prefer fictitious composite systems which make “clear majorities” “very likely”, or in which “proportionality” is “always guaranteed”, it is not always clear what these mean in practice (how likely is “very likely”?). These studies run up against the limits of what conjoint studies can assess.

B3.4 Migrant political behaviour

Migrants are a numerically important group, but a group that has been studied more as the *object* of different policies than as a political *subject*. Studies which have looked at migrants’ political attitudes have often focused on particular groups (migrants “from countries that are perhaps less developed, less democratic and have lower living standards to countries that may be more developed, more democratic and have higher living standards”: Peltoniemi (2018), 393) which raise particular research questions, often concerning the way in which contact with a more democratic host country can affect migrants’ attitudes towards democracy. The role and opinions of migrants from consolidated democracies (say, Finns in Sweden: (Peltoniemi, 2018), or Australians in the UK) have been comparatively neglected.

Exceptions to this general rule include studies of “external voting”, or voting from abroad in country-of-origin elections (Peltoniemi, 2018; Szulecki et al., 2023). The forms of political engagement adopted depend on citizenship rules in the host and origin countries, and on the ease of external voting. Although the relationship between political *engagement* in the

host and origin countries is likely to be zero-sum (Tsuda, 2012), this relationship is not always straightforward: time spent “abroad” is positively associated with the likelihood of voting in *both* country of residence and country of origin elections.

B4 Added value of the trans-Atlantic partnership

The proposed research project will only be possible given international collaboration of the type encouraged by the trans-Atlantic partnership. Migrants (whether current or former) are almost always a minority group in any given country. As such, polling migrants in any single country is expensive, and survey panel providers may not be able to achieve large numbers of completed responses amongst this group. Even if it were possible to survey a large number of migrants in any one country, a key part of our methodology involves pairwise comparisons between host countries and countries of origin/countries of former residence, and it is hard to learn from pairwise comparisons which always involve one specific object of comparison: any patterns identified may reflect the influence either of general attributes also shared by other objects of comparison or idiosyncratic features of that country. For these reasons only cross-national survey research can provide robust answers to the questions we pose. Although it is becoming increasingly possible for researchers within a single country to conduct cross-national survey research by using large multinational polling providers, the presence of researchers active in each fieldwork country has helped us assess the practical and financial feasibility of this study, and has already led to country-specific revisions to our draft survey instrument.

These are reasons why this research has to be cross-national, but not reasons which are specific to trans-Atlantic research. Our research needs to span the Atlantic because we investigate relative preferences for presidentialism over parliamentarism, and because pure presidentialism is predominantly found in the Americas. Fully half of the democracies listed as presidential in one popular comparative politics textbook (Clark et al., 2017) are in the Americas. We include amongst our fieldwork countries the world’s longest-lived presidential democracy in the form of the United States, which attracts migrants from the world over (including many parliamentary and semipresidential democracies). We are also able to examine the opinions of migrants in Canada, many of whom come from presidential democracies to the South. Conversely, although we have in Canada a parliamentary system in the Americas, we cannot rely on a single parliamentary system, especially not one which also uses single member electoral districts. We therefore also include European parliamentary (United Kingdom) and semipresidential (Poland) systems.

Within the set of TAP-participating countries, we have chosen to study countries which all have either high proportionate rates of inward migration (Canada, the USA, the UK) or outward migration (Poland). According to 2019 United Nations figures, Canada (21.3%), the USA (15.4%) and the United Kingdom (14.1%) are the TAP countries with the largest foreign-born populations per capita excepting Switzerland (which, for idiosyncratic reasons, is difficult to classify using the presidential/parliamentary divide). Although there are no good statistics on the proportion of return migrants, Polish emigration has been consistently high

by most international standards of comparison. This ensures that we are able to achieve a reasonable number of responses from current and former migrants in each country.

B5 Project Management, Dissemination, and Communications Plan (PMDC)

B5.1 Roles and responsibilities

Chris HANRETTY will have overall responsibility for the project, and will take on particular responsibility for survey design and delivery (WP1). He will also supervise a post-doctoral researcher who will be responsible for WP6 (effects of migrants' experiential arguments).

Ruth DASSONNEVILLE and Sona and Matt GOLDER will be primarily responsible for compiling information on "ground truth" measures of the meso-level democratic values (WP3). DASSONNEVILLE will supervise a post-doctoral researcher who will lead the data collection for promissory representation; this post-doc will spend time at Penn State, where s/he will work with a project manager who will handle polling in North America and the maintenance of different dissemination outputs.

Ben STANLEY will be primarily responsible for producing the just-noticeable differences referenced in WP4.

Natasha WUNSCH will have overall responsibility for the analysis of discrete institutional choices (WP5). She will supervise a post-doctoral researcher who will carry out the bulk of the empirical analysis for this work-package.

All named researchers and the post-doctoral researchers will be coauthors on, and jointly responsible for, any academic outputs of the project, except where otherwise agreed.

B5.2 Collaborations

This grant represents an opportunity for a group of researchers who are well embedded into the comparative politics community to collaborate formally for the first time, and to build on existing informal relationships. Sona and Matt GOLDER have, in addition to their coauthored work, played a key role in the study of comparative politics in the United States, holding positions of responsibility nationally within the American Political Science Association and locally through their founding of the Penn State Comparative Politics Research Lab. Sona and Matt GOLDER met with DASSONNEVILLE through events organised under the auspices of the SSHRC-funded *Making Electoral Democracy Work* project. DASSONNEVILLE in turn invited WUNSCH to lecture to a summer school organized by the CÉRIUM-FMSH Chair on Global Governance, which DASSONNEVILLE holds jointly with Romain Lachat. DASSONNEVILLE and HANRETTY have spoken at events organized by

Royal Holloway's Democracy and Elections Centre, contributing their experiences on election forecasting, and HANRETTY and STANLEY have shared code relating to election forecasting and poll aggregation.

B5.3 Dissemination and communication

The large amount of data generated by the project will make possible many different academic articles, and we imagine that the two post-docs recruited by the grant will use this data for their own articles. We would like to describe five key academic outputs which we commit to producing as part of the grant, and which will form the basis for our dissemination events.

- “Just-noticeable differences in electoral democracy”: the first application of our approach in WP4, using an existing ground truth measure. Target journal: *Journal of Democracy*.
- “Making values in electoral democracy commensurable through just-noticeable differences”. The second, flagship, output from WP4. Target journal: *American Political Science Review*.
- “Preferences over Parliamentary and Presidential government from those who know both systems” and “Individuals with experience of majoritarian and proportional electoral systems prefer [proportional] systems”: twin outputs from WP5. Target journals: *Comparative Political Studies*, *Electoral Studies*.
- “Arguments from experience and support for institutional reform”. The key output from WP6. Target journal: *Journal of Experimental Political Science*.

Each output will presented at a major international conference (target conference: American Political Science Association), submitted for publication during the period of the grant, and will be the subject of a blog-post and a short (~5 minute) explanatory video.

B5.4 Workplan and timeline

Figure 3 shows the outline of work for the project, grouped according to work package. Individual work package elements have start and stop dates; dissemination events are marked using ‘D’. Dissemination events (preceded by team meetings) take place at the annual conference of the American Political Science Association conference, the largest conference in political science.

All work packages depend on the first two (survey-related) work packages. The paper on just-noticeable differences for electoral democracy (a key output of WP4) can be written once the survey is complete, since the corresponding “ground-truth” data on levels of electoral democracy already exists. Similarly, the paper on institutional choices can be written once the survey is complete because it does not depend on any ground truths.

The largest single dependency in the workplan is the dependency on the coding of promissory representation, necessary for the paper on JNDs for meso-level democratic values.

We operationalize promissory representation as the proportion of governing party pledges fulfilled. We code promissory representation for the six most commonly reported democratic countries of origin in our surveys. We code the promises of governing parties for three electoral periods. If there are on average two governing parties per period, this implies $2 \times 6 \times 3 = 36$ manifestos/platforms to code in each fieldwork country. Based on discussions with authors who have written on pledge fulfillment, we estimate that it takes around 90 hours to code a single manifesto, and thus 3240 hours to code 36. We divide this labour between six research assistants in each fieldwork country, each working 12 hours/week for 45 weeks, with a varying amount of extra time for statutory annual leave in each country.

B5.5 Training

Two members of the research team will be post-doctoral researchers (PDRs). These PDRs will benefit from exposure to researchers with a track record of mentorship (narrative résumés, §§3) and bespoke training events on scientific workflow (Spring 2025) and scientific communication (Spring 2026) held in London and delivered by the PI. PDRs will be encouraged to develop their own projects during their contract, and/or to develop projects using data generated by work packages 1-3.

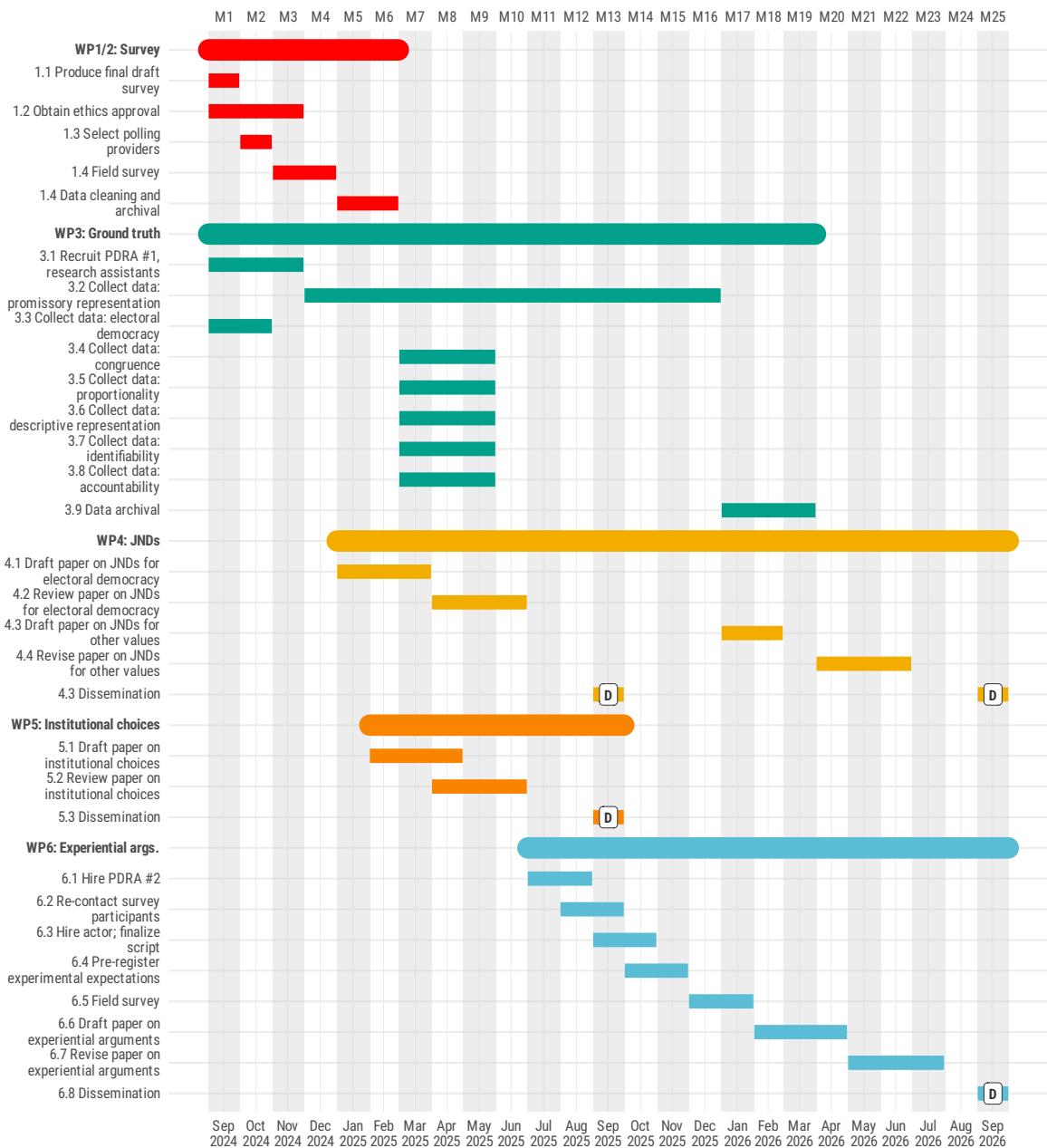


Figure 3: Gantt chart, with dissemination events marked D.

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