

# How Citizens Perceive Others: The Role of Social Norms for Democracies

**Daniel Bischof** University of Münster & Aarhus University

**Tim Lars Allinger** Aarhus University

**Morgan Le Corre Juratic** Aarhus University

**Kristian Vrede Skaaning Frederiksen** Aarhus University

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## Abstract

*Generations of political scientists seek to understand the relationship between citizens' democratic values and democratic stability. The key premise of this research tradition is that democratic societies live on a "social consensus" over a set of democratic values; a democratic norm. Yet, until today scholarship has neither carefully theorized the role of nor measured the social nature of this consensus. Building on research in social psychology, we conceptualize democratic norms as social norms: citizens may think that most people in democracies support its institutions (descriptive norm) and also that one ought to do so (injunctive norm). We then measure these perceptions across 14 countries using nationally representative surveys covering 31% of the world's population. We find that citizens have a strong perception of social democratic norms; however, mostly on abstract forms of support. Using a vignette experiment we also reveal that respondents' preferences are conditional on their perception of social norms. Our research has important implications for research on democracy showcasing the role social norms play to craft democratic support in our societies.*

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Institute for Political Science, University of Münster (DE) & Department of Political Science, Aarhus University (DK); [db@danbischof.com](mailto:db@danbischof.com). We would like to thank participants at the workshop "Democratic Crisis? Individual Level Perspectives" at Aarhus University and Suthan Krishnarajan (discussant) in particular for helpful comments and the audience during an invited talk at the University of Lucerne, Duisburg-Essen and during the EPSA conference 2024. We also thank Sirianne Dahlum and Natasha Wunsch for their feedback on previous versions. Daniel thanks Florian Foos, Vicky Fouka, Jonathan Mummolo, Erik Peterson, Vicente Valentim, and Markus Wagner for ideas and comments on earlier ideas on which this paper is based upon. We thankfully acknowledge funding from the Carlsberg Foundation (Semper Ardens: Accelerate 2021) and the Aarhus University Research Foundation (AUFF Starting Grant 2021).

## 1 Introduction

**O**n the 29<sup>th</sup> of August 2020, a violent mob tried to storm the German parliament; just a few months later, in January 2021, rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol; two years later, the Brazilian Congress was attacked. All of these events took journalists, politicians, and practitioners by surprise: after all, support for democracy in all three countries was understood to be very high, and research broadly supports such claims for most democracies (see e.g. Claassen 2020; Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2022). The overwhelming majority of citizens support democracy and its institutions, and this support is very stable. But if support for democracy is high, how can we explain that citizens storm political institutions, deny election results, and that support for illiberal as well as anti-democratic practices and politicians is on the rise?

When interviewing the rioters, particularly in the U.S., prosecutors identified a key mechanism: ‘herd mentality’.<sup>1</sup> Rioters followed the behavior of *other citizens*, believing it justified their actions. Social psychology research shows that perceived *social norms* significantly influence individual attitudes and behavior (Bicchieri 2016; Tankard and Paluck 2016; Bursztyn and Yang 2021). However, in political science, beyond landmark studies on turnout (see e.g. Green and Hobolt 2008; Fieldhouse, Cutts, and Bailey 2020) and recent research on the far right (see e.g. Bischof and Wagner 2019; Valentim 2023; Alvarez-Benjumea and Valentim 2023), social norms have been rarely measured empirically, and their causal effects on individual preferences remain underexplored.

But social norms might play a crucial role specifically for citizens’ support of democracy and its institutions. In fact, the original idea of classical research on democratic support in the early 1950s – inspired also by the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war and the early failure of some European democracies – was that *democracies live on a “social consensus”* (Almond and Verba 1965: Chapter 1). Namely that most of its citizens share a common perception of what is accepted “as norms of desirable conduct, so that deviations therefrom are subject to questioning and usually social disapproval” (Griffith, Plamenatz, and Pennock 1956: 104). However, the tradition of the civic culture studies went on to measure individual support for democracy, instead of the actual perception of others. It also never fully developed a conceptual agreement and grounding on the social aspect of this consensus.

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<sup>1</sup>See, e.g.: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/05/podcasts/the-daily/january-6-capitol-riots-anniversary.html>.

## 1 Introduction

In this paper, we seek to add both a theoretical and empirical perspective allowing us to introduce the perception of others as a social consensus for democracy. We conceptualize this social consensus as a second-order belief: *citizens' perception of how many fellow citizens support democracy*. Building on research in social psychology we then develop two dimensions for the democratic consensus. First, a descriptive dimension containing citizens' perceptions about how many other citizens support democracy. Second, an injunctive dimension adds a normative perspective about what others believe one *ought to do* and support in a democracy.

Theoretically, we argue that citizens have a clear perception of how many fellow citizens will support democracy in its abstract forms: most of them. This is so because across all democracies the democratic system in its general understanding has become the only game in town; even when citizens challenge democratic institutions, such as during the storm on the US capitol, they still believe to act in favor of democracy and its institutions. Yet, when moving on to more complex and hands-on questions about *liberal democracy*, citizens should be less sure about who else supports such ideas as minority rights, freedom of expression, or political violence.

In addition, this understanding of the democratic consensus as a social norm enables us to explore to what extent perceived norms deviate from citizens' democratic attitudes. Distinguishing on the one hand democratic social norms and on the other hand individual preferences gives us the opportunity to assess whether some democratic preferences are conditional to social pressures and to show whether Griffith, Plamenatz, and Pennock (1956) were correct that deviations from a 'democratic social norm' might be perceived as being punished by peers.

Empirically, we leverage an original survey design with both descriptive and experimental components allowing us to precisely measure the perceptions of others and citizens' sensitivity to social pressures when it comes to democracy. The preregistered data collection encompasses 35,674 citizens across 14 contemporary democracies covering 31% of the world's population.<sup>2</sup> To assess the social conditionality of respondents' democratic attitudes and address the concern that respondents may project their own views on society, we rely on a vignette experiment randomly manipulating the perceived social norms in relation to democracy.

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<sup>2</sup>Austria, Brazil, Denmark, Germany, France, Hungary, India, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Spain, South Africa, United Kingdom, United States. The case selection is based on the idea to maximize institutional variation across cases as well as capturing a variety of countries that recently experienced anti-democratic activities either by citizens (e.g. Storm of the Capitol) or political elites (e.g. harming the judiciary and/or democratic institutions).

## 1 Introduction

We find that citizens across all countries have a strong perception of social norms when it comes to minimal and institutional settings of democracy; they specifically believe that most others (more than 90% in all countries) support the idea that candidates should accept elections losses and non-violent take-over (Przeworski 2019). And similar findings apply to more abstract dimensions such as the “support for democracy as a system”. Yet, we bring to light much weaker social norms for less abstract forms of democratic support mostly speaking to the *liberal* dimensions of democracy: Citizens have a hard time reading others’ minds when it comes to minority interests, political violence and limits on freedom of expression. We also uncover that younger generations have a much weaker perception of social norms in all countries. The same is true for supporters of radical/extreme right parties.

Our preregistered vignette experiments then uncover that respondents’ support for democracy is causally related to the social norms they perceive in society; the higher social norms are the more likely respondents become to support democracy in our experimental setup. We can thereby also show that across the 14 countries studied most respondents continue to support a democratic system and disapprove the storming of its institutions independent of social norms. However, 5% of the population are willing to switch to become democratic opponents in our fictitious scenarios, while democratic supporters become less willing to make the case for democracy in public when they perceive low support for it.

Our findings leave us behind with some good news but also several concerning perspectives. On the one hand, citizens perceive both descriptive and injunctive social norms when it comes to democracy. And even in the US, a country that recently faced a threat of accepting electoral results, most citizens perceive a norm to accept election losses. On the other hand, many citizens living in democracies today do not perceive social norms when it comes to constructive ideas about liberal democracy; specifically our findings related to limits on freedom of expression and preferences for a strong (autocratic) leader are concerning. We also reveal that specific segments of society, i.e. supporters of far right parties, perceive much weaker democratic social norms; making these groups much more prone to challenge our democracies and its institutions. Finally, even if the results highlight the existence of a democratic consensus in terms of general democratic support, our findings suggest that citizens’ preferences in this regard are conditional to these democratic social

## **2 What we know about democracy and perception of others**

norms, and may therefore be particularly sensitive to societal shifts should these norms erode in societies.

Our paper makes three key contributions to the literature on democratic support. First, we conceptualize a key and old idea of civic culture studies; we conceptually define a “consensus for democracy”. Second, we present a survey design (with descriptive *and* experimental components) facilitating researchers with tools to measure the democratic consensus and showcase its implications for individual preferences. Third, we report that while a democratic consensus might exist, the implications stemming from democratic formal and informal institutions appear to be excluded from such a social norm for democracy. This finding is deeply concerning and raises doubts as to how much citizens can internalize democratic principles even in advanced democracies.

### **2 What we know about democracy and perception of others**

Inspired by classical work such as Dahl (1956), Lipset (1959), or Easton (1965) a rich body of research has developed seeking to understand the public's preferences for democracy. The major reason for this interest might appear simple but in fact lies at the heart of democratic theory: democracies are legitimized through citizens' support for its institutions, policies and electoral outcomes (Easton 1965: 278). While Easton provided the groundwork with his idea that systems need a form of “diffuse support” by its citizens, it was in fact Dahl (1971) who provided the more nuanced argument that democracy (“polyarchy”) is conditional on a distinctive set of beliefs *shared* by its citizens. The classical works also then triggered the rich empirical descriptions about democratic support in democracies provided by what is frequently referred to “civic culture studies” such as the foundational work by Almond and Verba (1965). Put simply, these studies are based upon the idea that when citizens' support for democracy diminishes so does democracy itself diminish.

Reassuringly, until today most studies in the line of this tradition conducted on the public's support for democratic institutions in advanced democracies – with some recent controversially discussed exceptions (Foa and Mounk 2016)<sup>3</sup> – report high support for democracy: citizens in liberal democracies overwhelmingly support democracy as their system of governance (Claassen et al. 2024; Claassen 2020; Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2022; Voeten 2017; Inglehart 2003).

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<sup>3</sup>Replication studies show little support for the claim that democratic support is in crisis (e.g. Voeten 2017).

## 2 What we know about democracy and perception of others

Beyond sharing the finding that in many regards democracies still find strong legitimacy among their citizens, these studies also are based upon similar conceptualizations of and questionnaires about democratic support. Conceptually, they build upon the idea that *individual support* is key to understanding system legitimacy: that a society within which the majority supports democracy when asked about it in surveys, is one with a democratic norm (see e.g. Brug et al. 2021: 131). “Norms” are here, thus, largely understood as the distribution of values across the entire population; a norm is understood to exist if “enough” citizens support democracy. In this context, Almond and Verba (1965: Chapter 1) talk repeatedly about a “social consensus” over a set of values which is then measured with a population mean on individual preferences for democracy.

But the question is if such a consensus is at all reflected in the number of citizens supporting democracies in surveys. Put differently, the question is how political scientists seek to conceptualize and understand such a consensus, this “norm” for democracy.

Our key point of departure is that conceptually norms are distinct from individual attitudes. Much like research in social psychology, research on democratic attitudes understands norms as a *guidance for individual behavior*. Nowhere does this become clearer than when we look into the motivation of research standing in the tradition of civic culture studies: they are motivated by the idea that mass support makes it much more difficult for the individual to speak out and act against the “democratic norm”. The mechanism standing behind this is a fear of being sanctioned by other citizens who are read as overwhelmingly supporting the core principles and ideas of liberal democracies.

This idea emphasizes that it is crucial to understand *citizens' expectations about one another in relation to democracy*. We are of course interested in whether or not citizens themselves have democratic values, but *we are equally interested in if they perceive their fellow citizens to support democracy as well*. In turn, this suggests that individual support for democracy does not allow us to measure or understand if there is a consensus or norm for democracy.

Our approach is thus distinct from recent contributions on support for undemocratic politicians (e.g. Graham and Svolik 2020), which have not looked into the role of social norms for supporting democracy. Relatedly, our approach is distinct from work on norms in relation to punishing violations of democratic values (e.g. Goldstein 2023; Wuttke, Dahlum, and Kotsadam 2023; Braley et al. 2022; Cagle and Davis 2023), as we focus on the overarching norm of supporting democracy as a system. Typically,

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the aforementioned studies show that support for democracy is a poor predictor of actual willingness to defend it. Although theorizing and measuring the social consensus in relation to supporting democracy is the key contribution of our project, we also contribute to the aforementioned stream of research by providing answers to *why* this is the case. Willingness to defend democracy may, for some citizens, be a product of social norms rather than a true preference for democracy. This makes democracy vulnerable to threats from politicians undermining the social consensus and attracting support from such “fake democrats”.

## **3 The social consensus on democracy and social norms**

### **What social norms are**

To better understand what social norms in relation to democracy are and how they matter for democracy, we build on research in social psychology. We start from the idea that preferences about liberal democracy and its institutions are *conditional*, and they are *social*: an individual’s preference for democracy depends on their perception of others. Depending on how others behave in a democracy, the values others reveal in public, a person will adapt their own preferences for democracy.

Such a *conformity* is then mainly defined by external costs; the aforementioned fear of being sanctioned by others for one’s opinions and attitudes (Bicchieri 2016). In the case of democratic preferences, a sanction can come in many forms such as heated debates with friends or the actual societal exclusion by friends or even family (Mason 2013; Mutz 2002). Thus, the sanction mechanism tends to run through our reference network, but might in many instances run through society as a whole; in the case of citizens living in a democracy the baseline assumption might very well be that *most support democracy, so should we individually*.

Yet, it is likely that information about deviating from the democratic social norm might not run through society as a whole. This is so because time and again research finds strong support among democratic citizens for its institutions. While citizens might not engage in academic research, the idea of overwhelming support within society for democracy is frequently reproduced on TV, in newspapers and in other media. Thus, citizens in most instances should share the perception that most other citizens also support democracy. In contrast, local networks or friends might challenge the idea of

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a democratic consensus. For instance, local protests via right fringe movements or friendships in isolated, rural places might produce a different perception of democratic support among citizens.

These perceptions of others are then defined via two components. The first component follows the idea laid out above: *one may think that most people in advanced democracies support democratic institutions*. This is what can be called a descriptive social norm for democracy; this component is based on our impressions of how other people behave, and what they do and not do – exactly as discussed above. Descriptive social norms are well known in the social sciences and have been shown to matter for various behaviors in our societies (Wenzel 2005) – the most prominent here might be whether or not people litter in public (Winter and Zhang 2018). In the case of democracy they have been proven to be key to increasing turnout in elections (Karpowitz et al. 2011; Panagopoulos, Larimer, and Condon 2014; Doherty et al. 2017; Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008; Gerber and Rogers 2009).

The second component has not been discussed so far in our paper: in the case of democracy we also argue that a normative component is decisive in order for a social consensus to emerge. It is not only that citizens need to perceive others to support democracy. But also that they perceive others think *they ought to do so*. This is key, as norms may be weaker if only descriptive expectations, but not what is considered appropriate, evolve in a given society (Bicchieri and Xiao 2009; Bicchieri 2016). This theoretical idea is also deeply rooted in the original works on democratic support (Dahl 1956; Lipset 1959; Almond and Verba 1965). Arguments in relation to normative pressures are most emphasized in research on democratic transitions; for instance following WWII when Germans built up a fascist taboo without the attitudes and values of the population changing overnight.

#### **How social norms matter for democracy: (mis-)perception and revealed preferences**

Building on this theoretical framework a range of observable implications are derivable.

As outlined above we have strong reasons to assume that most citizens perceive others to support democracy – at least in its very abstract form. The question is how deep-rooted citizens' understanding of democracy is. Previous research casts doubt that citizens have such a strong attachment to the principles behind democracy (Graham and Svolik 2020; Frederiksen 2022; Krishnarajan 2023; Wunsch, Jacob, and Derkzen 2022). Put differently, it is cheap to outline support for democratic institutions, but to fully understand and incorporate its institutions might be much more complex. We believe that

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this also translates to the perception of others: citizens might perceive that most support democracy and normatively expect others to do so as well. But even if they themselves support more complex institutional settings of democracy, such as limitations on free speech, they expect fellow citizens to not necessarily support it. This should apply to both descriptive and injunctive components of the social democratic norm.

All in all, this should also mean that citizens have developed accurate perceptions of others in relation to abstract forms of support for democracy; but the contrary should be the case for more hands-on ideas about liberal democracy. Thus, we assume that misperception is widespread for both descriptive and injunctive norms for liberal democracy components.

Beyond these general trends, individual-level characteristics might change the perception one has about others. Previous research on “democratic de-consolidation” emphasizes that a key component might be generational shifts. Most prominently Foa and Mounk (2016) study generational patterns of democratic support and outline that younger cohorts all in all might show lower support for democracy. While some doubts exist in relation to the analyses conducted by the authors, more recent research further underlines these findings (Frederiksen 2024; Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2022). The theoretical argument standing behind this observed trend is a *cohort effect* with younger cohorts being much more critical towards their elites and democracy as a system. It is exactly this cohort effect that might conditionality drive social norms within these groups: namely that younger cohorts are more critical about democracy because their peers outline much less support for democracy than among older cohorts.

A second key individual component linked with lower social norms in relation to democracy is voting and political ideologies in general. Radical right parties are in particular questioning various democratic institutions and in some countries actually weakening them if in power (e.g. Hungary, US, Poland). Thus, it is likely that their supporters have a different perception of social norms in relation to democracy. The key mechanisms behind this are elite-cueing effects and the perception of peers.

Besides these two individual-level effects, we will also correlate our measure of social norms in relation to democracy with typical socio-economic variables for which we do not have strong expectations about their effect (gender, education, income, employed).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>All in all, one might theorize that lower socio-economic status could be correlated with a weaker perception of social norms in relation to democracy. But from our perspective, we have little reason to assume that this is a general trend

## 4 Research Design

To develop a descriptive idea about social democratic norms we use a preregistered survey design across 14 countries.<sup>5</sup> More specifically we teamed up with Cint and administered our survey to 3,000 respondents in each country. Besides typical questions on respondents' socio-economic background we asked a set of batteries on democratic support as well as on respondents' perception of social norms in relation to supporting democracy on different dimensions. In [SI.1](#) we provide a full list of the questions we ask in relation to democracy and social norms.

### Measuring perceptions of others: the social consensus

To measure the perception of others we follow research in economics and social psychology which has extensively studied social norms (e.g. Bicchieri [2016](#); Bursztyn and Yang [2021](#)). After respondents answer a set of standard questions about their own preferences in relation to democracy, we ask them *how many citizens out of 100 support democracy*. For instance:

We will ask the previous question **to 100 people in your country**. If you had to guess, how many of them will say that they agree with each of the following statements?

*“Democracy may have its problems, but it is better than any other form of government”<sup>6</sup>?*

We chose a total of ten items that partly reflect standardized questions about democratic support (e.g. abstract support for democracy, support for army rule) – allowing us to compare our findings with previous research – but also developed a set of newly designed questions speaking to contemporary challenges democracies are facing such as tradeoffs between majority rule and minority interests or forms of political violence (storming political institutions).<sup>7</sup> This then also allows us

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<sup>5</sup>we can observe in the data and that is not clustered on how the nation as such does economically.

<sup>5</sup>We got IRB approval from Aarhus University to conduct our studies. The anonymous link to our PAP can be found in the [SI SI.8](#).

<sup>6</sup>To measure respondents' injunctive norm perceptions, we asked them: "One thing is other people's opinions. We now want to ask you about **what you think other people think is the appropriate opinion to have**. If you had to guess, out of 100 people in your country, how many will say that **people ought to agree** with each the following statements

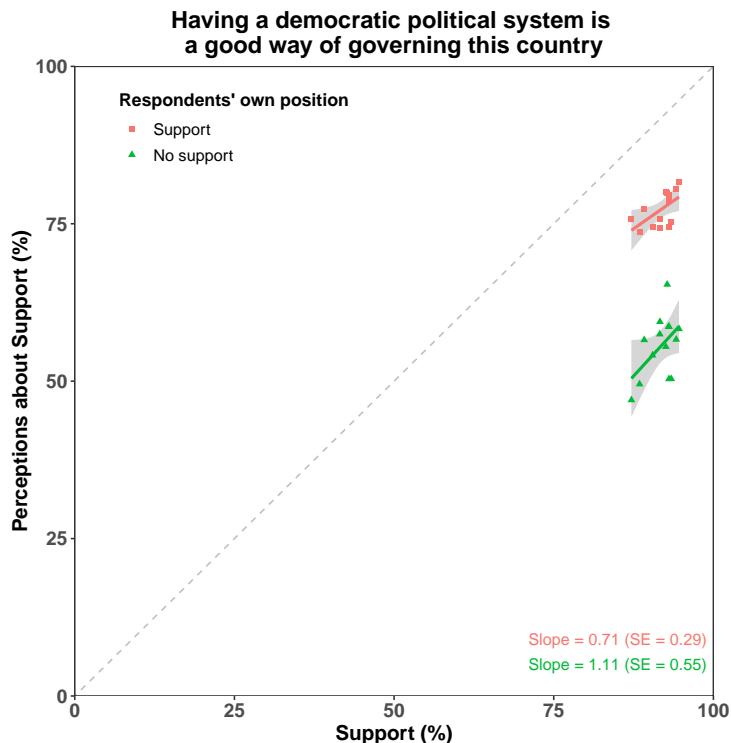
<sup>7</sup>The items are: "having a democratic political system is a good way of governing this country", "democracy may have its problems, but it is better than any other form of government", "freedom of speech should have strict limits to protect vulnerable individuals and groups", "having a strong leader who doesn't have to bother with parl. and elect. is a good way of governing this country", "candidates should accept election losses peacefully, even if they narrowly lose", "having the army rule is a good way of governing this country", "the will of the majority should always prevail, even over the rights of minorities", "hostility against minorities is sometimes justified, even if it ends up in violence", "sometimes it is necessary to use violent means such as storming political institutions", and a set of randomized trade-off questions.

to calculate whether or not respondents misperceive democratic support in their country on the different dimensions.<sup>8</sup>

A key concern for approaches measuring social norms is what has been called “projection”. Projection means that respondents, instead of reporting their actual perception of others, use their own preferences and project these onto society. However, we provide two responses to such concerns. First, it seems unlikely that *all* respondents use projection. This would mean that supporters of democracy would perfectly project that almost all others do so as well and *vice versa*. But as will be shown below, we find a lot of “gray” distributions across the items.<sup>9</sup>

Second and more importantly, we provide several empirical tests indicating that projection is unlikely to be driving our findings. A first test is reported in [Figure 1](#), displaying the cross-country correlations between democratic support and social norm perceptions. Readers’ attention should

**Figure 1:** Do respondents use projection? Unlikely.



Note: Each marker reports the average support/social norm perception for each country split by support and no support.

rest on the slope we report for the green/triangle (=no support for democracy) and the red/square

<sup>8</sup>misperception = perceived support - actual support.

<sup>9</sup>Previous research address such concerns by priming respondents to be as precise as they can and by offering lottery prizes for the most accurate answers. We tried such an approach in a related study without success: the lottery prime was correlated with excessive dropouts from our survey ([Bischof et al. 2024](#)). We, thus, refrain from such a strategy here.

## *5 Findings: social norms and (mis-)perception*

(=support for democracy) group per country. Each marker indicates the true share of people supporting democracy (x-axis) and the average perception of how many people support democracy (y-axis) in each of the fourteen countries we study. If projection were at play, either one or both slopes should be rather flat (=close to perfect projection in each group). But this is not the case. In contrast, we find positive slopes for both groups, suggesting that citizens are able to assess public support for democracy, independently of their own opinion.<sup>10</sup> Thus, differences in social norm perceptions cannot be explained by respondents simply projecting their own views onto society.

### **5 Findings: social norms and (mis-)perception**

In the first step, we study the descriptive results across all our countries to map out how social norms vary across items and potentially countries. As reporting all ten items across 14 countries is a close to impossible task, we focus on three key items throughout our analysis: arguably the most common method to assess democratic values, “having a democratic system is a good way of governing”, “freedom of speech should have limits to protect minorities”, to represent one of the key pillars of liberal democracy, and political violence via storming institutions as a challenge to democracy.

Before testing our theoretical framework we outline below rich descriptive evidence across the three items. [Figure 2](#) reports the distribution of our social norm questions across all countries. The dashed black line then reports the mean support each of the social norms finds within the public—the answers to the ego questions. To calculate this, we count how many individuals showcase support in the individual preferences for each of the items. Surrounding this, in colors from green to red, are respondents’ perceptions of others; their descriptive social norms. The darker the coloration of the norm perception, the further it deviates from the true level in the country. Thus, darker colors represent a stronger misperception of social norms.

Across all cases, we find that citizens perceive strong social norms in terms of supporting democracy in abstract terms but also according to minimalist definitions, including the practice of accepting election losses.<sup>11</sup> Most respondents are aware that these are widely expected norms in the fourteen countries we study. This finding was somewhat unexpected to us, as we envisioned much more

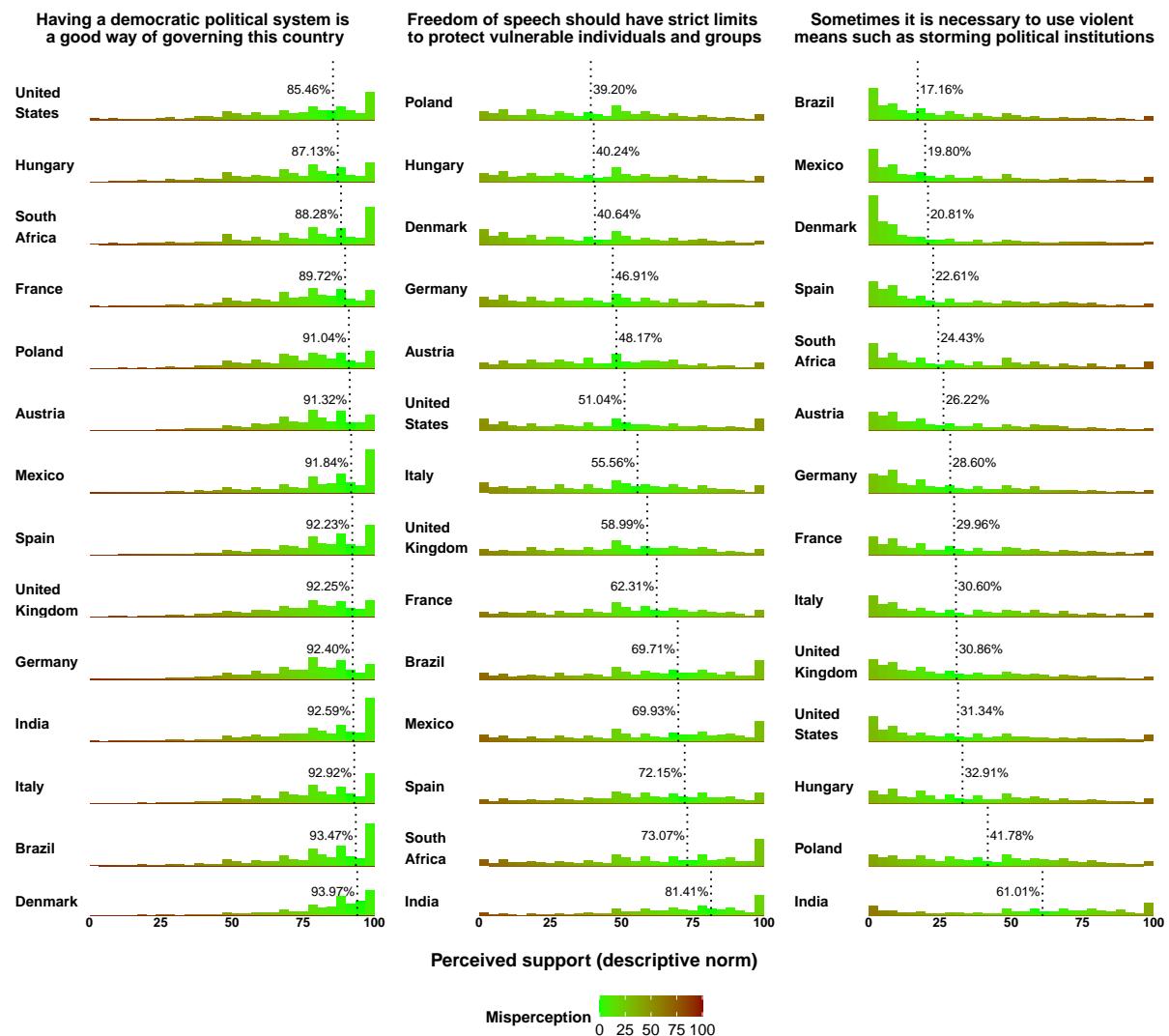
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<sup>10</sup>In the SI we report the same figure for all ten items in our survey.

<sup>11</sup>For the perception plots of the remaining items, please consult the SI.

## 5 Findings: social norms and (mis-)perception

**Figure 2:** Perception of descriptive norms across countries



Note: Reported are histograms (perception of others=descriptive social norms) along with the average individual support for each item (dashed line along with % support).

variation across the fourteen countries. There is good reason to assume that in countries such as Mexico, which is plagued by corruption, even within political institutions, support for the concept of democracy should be lower than in a country such as Denmark.

In terms of “freedom of speech should have limits to protect minorities,” an item clearly linked to the idea of liberal democracy (Diamond 1999), we observe much starker variation across the countries we study, both in individual support for freedom of speech and social norms. Poland, Hungary, Denmark, Germany, and Austria appear to have no social norm on this item. If anything, such a social norm exists only in the remaining countries. However, even in those countries where we observe average individual support for this item, the perception about others is spread out across

## 5 Findings: social norms and (mis-)perception

the 100-point scale. All in all, it seems fair to say that citizens have a hard time perceiving a social norm for (or against) freedom of speech.

On the contrary, such a social norm seems imminent when we look into citizens' support and perception of "using violent means such as storming political institutions." Here, we observe that in thirteen countries, citizens perceive a *negative* social norm, meaning that most are not supportive of this idea. The only exception is India, where society seems split on or even endorsing the idea.

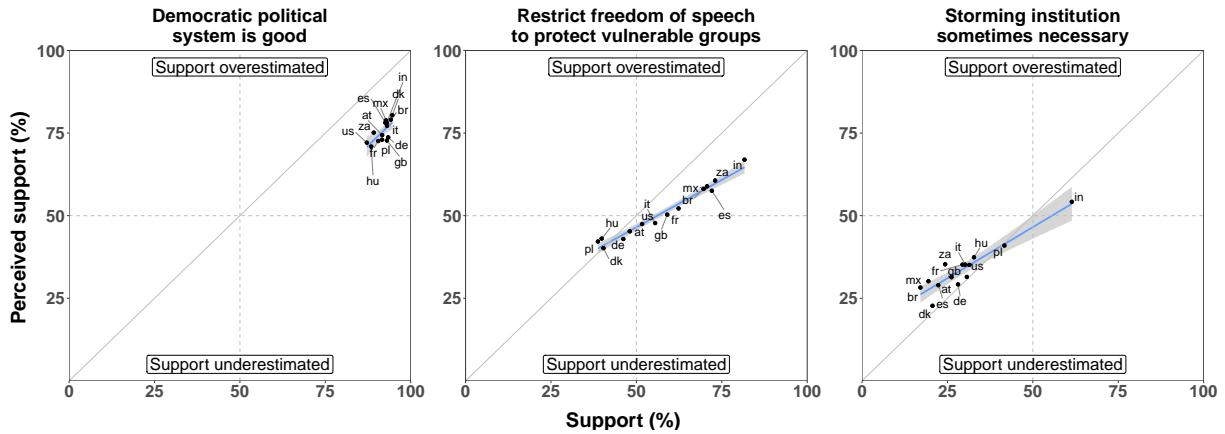
All in all, we find clear evidence that citizens perceive social norms, and these appear to be stronger for abstract items, such as "democracy is a good system of governing." In contrast, concrete items linked to *liberal* ideas of democracy stand on much shakier grounds and indeed are not perceived as social norms when it comes to the question of whether one might limit freedom of speech for minorities.

But how do these norm perceptions relate to the actual democratic support in a country? [Figure 3](#) illustrates this relationship, with the share of people supporting democracy on the x-axis and the average perceived support on the y-axis. Across all three items, we find a strong cross-country correlation, as indicated by the blue lines. Thus, citizens are capable of correctly "reading the room" – at least to a certain degree.

However, it is striking that all country markers in the left panel are below the 45° degree line. This means that citizens systematically, and on average, underestimate support for democracy in its abstract form in their country. As this might be driven by extreme outliers, we further bin the individual misperception scores for each country (see Figure [Figure SI 3](#)). Doing so shows that in each country, at least 50% of the population underestimate democratic support, with Poland, Germany and the UK at the top with almost 75%. To be clear, in all countries included in our study, we find clear perceptions of majority support for democracy. Yet, we do not know how strong social norms need to be for a democratic consensus to develop and to discourage individuals from challenging the democratic system. Therefore, this systematic misperception might pose a challenge to democratic stability. For the freedom of speech and storming institutions questions we find a slightly different trend. While there is no over- or underestimation of support in all countries equally, we find that the prevalence of minority positions is almost always over-estimated.

But our theoretical argument was not only linked to descriptive but also to injunctive social

**Figure 3:** Under- and over-estimation of support



norms. Figure [Figure SI 4](#) in the Supporting Information reports strong correlations between the two components of social norms across all items. While this might suggest that citizens are not able to differentiate the two concepts, we will show later, using the experimental findings, that this does not seem to be the case. Citizens do differentiate both components. On the contrary, it emphasizes that social norms in relation to democracy tend to have both a descriptive and injunctive component. Observing only one component would call into question whether or not social norms are at play ([Bicchieri et al. 2021](#); [Bicchieri 2016](#)).

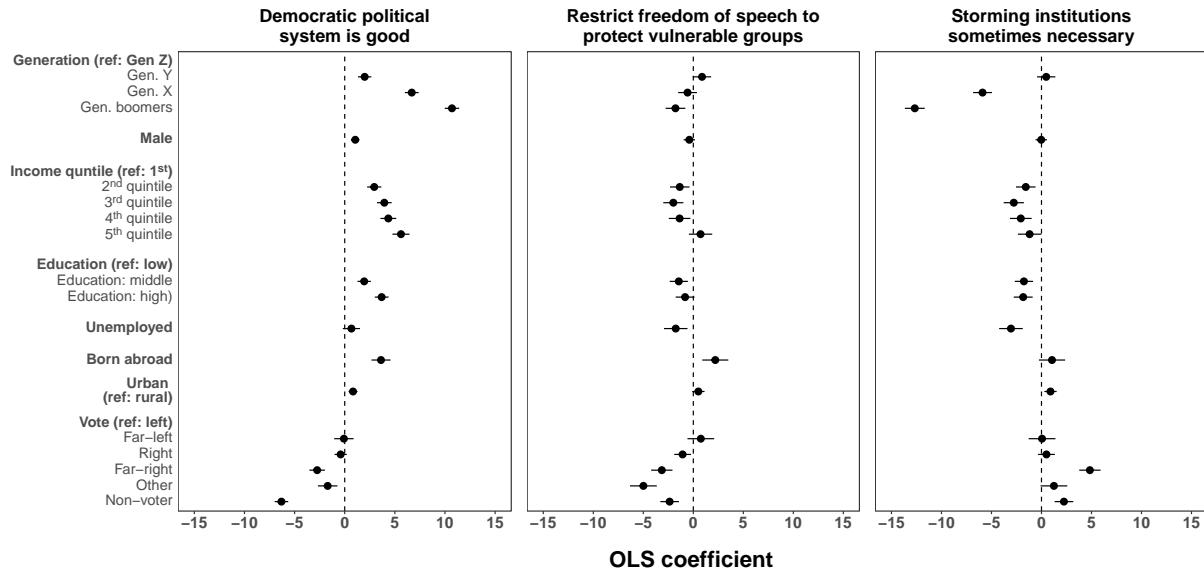
### Group differences in social norm perceptions

While abstract and minimalist democratic norms may be perceived as widespread in most societies, there might be important variations regarding how strong these norms hold for different social groups. In fact, as we laid out above in our theoretical expectations, individuals may be exposed to different norms depending on their social networks. For instance, one's perceptions of others' democratic attitudes and behavior may be highly influenced by their partisan identity, as this defines exposure to co-partisan family, friends, media or elites views on society. We explore these assumptions in the following. [Figure 4](#) illustrates the correlates of perceptions of descriptive norms in relation to three items, relying on standard OLS regressions using country-fixed effects.

First, across the items, strikingly different patterns emerge. While several individual-level differences stand out for support for democracy as well as storming political institutions, differences in perception about limits for freedom of speech are mostly driven by partisan identity. Non-voters and far-right supporters are much less likely to perceive a social norm in relation to minority interests and

## 5 Findings: social norms and (mis-)perception

**Figure 4:** OLS regression findings: who perceives social norms?



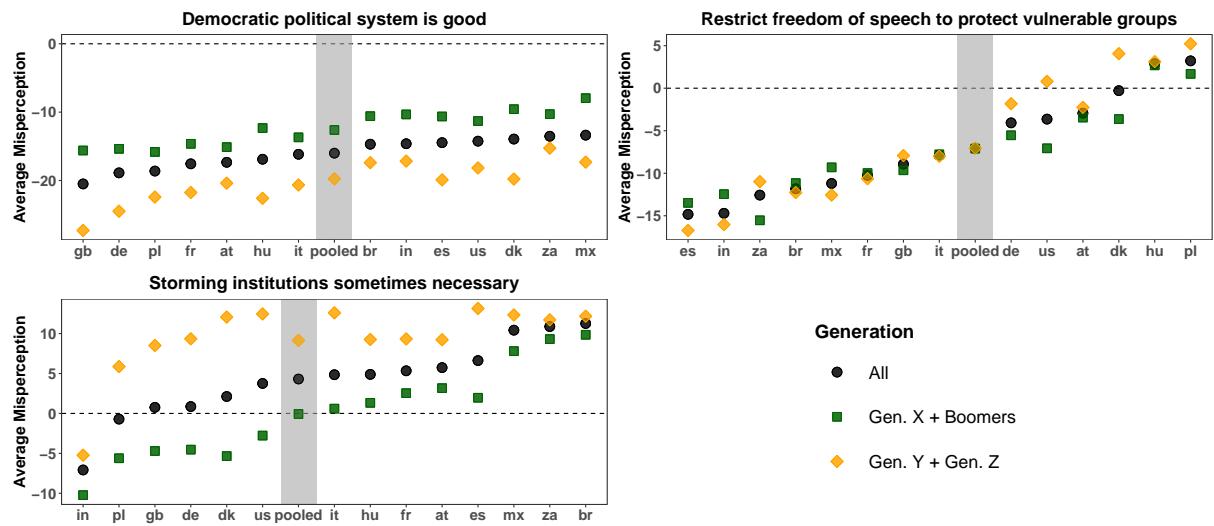
*Note:* Reported are OLS coefficients (point estimates) along with their 95% confidence intervals (whiskers). Omitted are country-fixed effects.

freedom of speech. Income, age, unemployment, and education do not show much of a correlation with the item. Unsurprisingly, the one item indicating a minority background, being born abroad, suggests more wishful thinking about others in society.

Second, the far-right filter bubble effect also appears in the remaining two items. On average, far-right supporters deviate about 5 points from the overall mean, meaning they have a significantly weaker norm perception in relation to democracy than supporters of other parties. A similar pattern emerges for non-voters, but it is much less pronounced across the items.

Third, for support for democracy as well as storming political institutions, striking and substantially large generational differences emerge. As we discussed in the theoretical framework, older people generally perceive stronger democratic norms, from general democratic support to more specific features of liberal democracies, supporting the democratic deconsolidation hypothesis (Foa and Mounk 2016; Frederiksen 2024; Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2022). This points to the fact that the deconsolidation hypothesis is causally linked to social norms within the reference networks of cohorts. Figure 5 seeks to report the cross-country differences for this generational gap. Again, we do not find much of a generational gap for freedom of speech across the countries. An interesting pattern is visible for South Africa though, where the gap is reversed – most likely to actual first hand experience with Apartheid. For the other two items differences across generations amount to as much

**Figure 5:** Generational gap across countries



Note: Reported are means per labeled group.

as almost 10 points differences. Importantly, there is still overwhelming support for democracy and most people also perceive this majority support. Yet, to assess to potentially negative consequences of individuals' underestimating the support for democracy, we turn to an experimental set-up in the next section.

## 6 Conditionality of preferences

### An experimental design to uncover conditionality

Above we hinted at the *conditionality of preferences* if social norms are at play. Conditionality is a key component of social norms: if social norms do exist, they should make individuals more likely to adapt to the social norm, to seek conformity. In our framework, this means that respondents should be more likely to support democracy the more they perceive others to do so. The stronger the social norms in relation to democracy, the more support we would expect.

Yet, learning about conditionality in surveys is a complex endeavor. Previous research has done so by seeking to increase social desirability pressures by e.g. randomly priming respondents already in the consent form that their responses might be shown to the public (e.g. Bursztyn, Egorov, and Fiorin 2020).<sup>12</sup> In a preregistered pre-test, we followed a similar approach and randomly primed

<sup>12</sup>Another challenge stems from the fact that respondents might not share their actual perception of others but instead project their own attitudes to their group of society as a whole (Robbins 2005). Some previous research relies on incentives to address these concerns (e.g. Bursztyn and Yang 2021). The idea behind incentives is that monetary

## *6 Conditionality of preferences*

respondents with four different social desirability treatments. But as we report elsewhere we find that such treatments rarely manipulate respondents and even then seem to have no effect on how they respond – even on highly controversial topics (Bischof et al. 2024).

We, thus, opted for a different approach. Instead, we used a vignette experiment implemented at the very end of our survey flow (for a similar approach please see: Bicchieri et al. 2021). We randomly assign respondents to four different scenarios showcasing different combinations of social norms in relation to democratic support:

A person like you lives in a country that is very similar to yours. Most/Few people in the country have said that they prefer to have a democratic political system. Most/Few have also said that supporting a democratic political system is something you ought to do.

Imagine being this person. Given the information above, would you support that the country has a democratic system?

The vignette varies the information respondents receive about both descriptive as well as injunctive democratic norms (the "most" information, which is – roughly, as the sentences needed minor adjustments to make sense – substituted by "few" in other conditions) in a 2x2 factorial design. This allows us to test whether compliance with a democratic social norm is conditional on respondents' expectations. It also comes with the advantage of being a fairly simple vignette not asking excessive cognitive skills from respondents. We designed two vignettes, one on support for democracy as a political system ("positive" social norm) and one on the disapproval of storming political institutions ("negative" social norm).

After each vignette, respondents are asked whether they themselves support democracy (*disapprove storming institutions*) in the scenario and whether they would share this opinion publicly in this scenario. This then allows us to test the conditionality of respondents' preferences and provides several advantages to other designs also discussed above. First, it allows us to claim much more directly the causality of social norms on respondents' democratic preferences. If there are significant differences between the four conditions they can only stem from the experimental manipulation.

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incentives should lead respondents to share their best case in order to maximize their economical benefits. Yet, we quickly learned during our pre-test that respondents drop out when being informed about the incentives; arguably because this suggests that they might need to share personal information in order to benefit from the incentives.

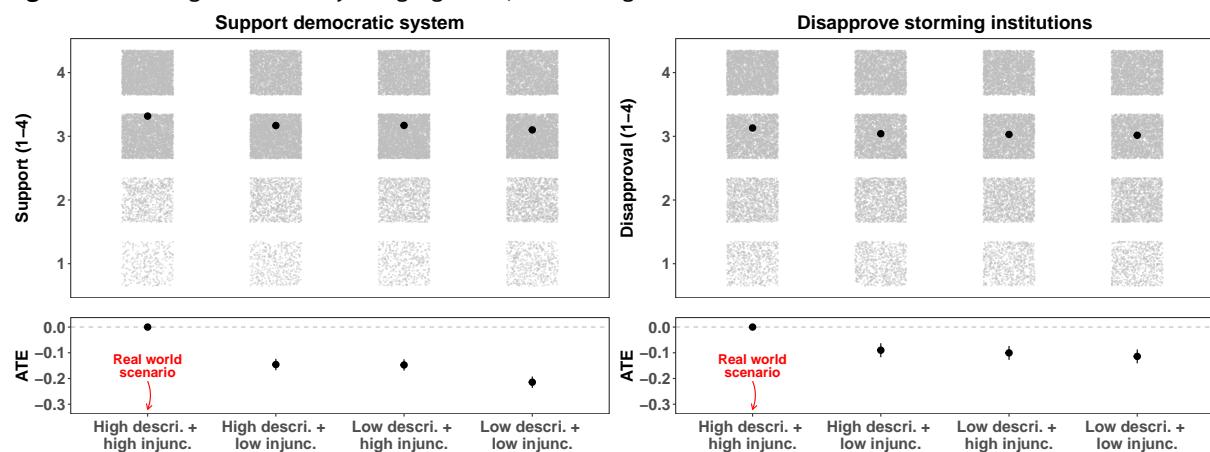
## 6 Conditionality of preferences

Second, using a fictitious scenario minimizes the risks of experimenter demand effects which might also be a compound effect for most other treatments seeking to induce social desirability pressures. Third, respondents were asked about their individual democratic preferences beforehand. This allows us to conduct a robustness check to see if the results hold when controlling for these pre-treatment preferences.

### Findings: conditionality

**Figure 6** reports the effects from our vignette experiments—which successfully manipulated respondents—pooled across all fourteen countries, with societal support for democracy, and thus social norms, decreasing from left to right.<sup>13</sup> Given that in all countries, most people do support democracy and also perceive majority support for it on both norm components, we take this "real world scenario" (most left) as a baseline and compare the other scenarios to it.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the estimates tell us what would happen if citizens underestimate the support for either one or both of the democratic social norm components.

**Figure 6:** Revealing conditionality using vignettes, OLS findings



Note: Reported are mean values (upper panels) and OLS coefficients (lower panels) along with their 95% confidence intervals (whiskers) pooled across all fourteen countries. ATEs include country-fixed effects.

Overall, the results from our vignette experiment support the idea of conditional preferences. In the treatment condition, for which both descriptive and injunctive norms are low (most right condition in **Figure 6**), support for democracy decreases by an ATE of 0.21 on a four-point scale for democratic

<sup>13</sup>In SI.6.1, we show a set of manipulation tests outlining that respondents received the information and can still recall it after they have moved on from the outcome questions of the vignettes.

<sup>14</sup>The same holds for the disapproval of storming political institutions, with India being the only exception.

## *6 Conditionality of preferences*

system support, and 0.11 for disapproving the storming of political institutions, compared to the high/high scenarios, respectively. The substantial meaning of this effect is reported in the upper panels. It corresponds to a decrease in support for democracy of about a quarter of a scaling point on the four-point scale and about a seventh of a scaling point for disapproving storming institutions. In the Supporting Information, we dichotomize the outcome variables to give these numbers a more intuitive interpretation, thereby differentiating between supporters and opponents. [Figure SI 6](#) presents the results, indicating that respondents in the low/low condition are 5.9 percentage points less likely to support a democratic system, and 3.2 percentage points less likely to disapprove of storming institutions, respectively (both  $p < 0.01$ ).

In both vignette experiments, we find significant negative effects in the treatment conditions that show respondents a high/low scenario with either descriptive or injunctive norms being low. Interestingly, we do not find a clear pattern between these two scenarios—even though we show in [Figure SI 5](#) that we achieved distinct manipulation of perceived descriptive and injunctive norms with the treatment material. Descriptive and injunctive norms seem to matter to an equal extent for citizens' preferences. Moreover, these effects are smaller than in the low/low conditions, though this difference is more pronounced and only statistically significant in the democratic support vignette. This indicates that descriptive and injunctive norms affect citizens' stances on democracy most strongly in conjunction.<sup>15</sup> These findings advance prior research attempting to disentangle the two types of norms (e.g. Bicchieri et al. [2021](#); Fieldhouse and Cutts [2021](#)).

In [Figure 7](#), we report the findings from the vignette experiments per country. Most strikingly we observe little differences in the patterns of the different treatment effects across the countries. Again, this indicates that respondents across context understand the difference between the two norm components. Conditionality is particularly high in countries such as Brazil, Germany, and Italy, but also shows considerable variation across the two democracy items; storming institutions is clearly much harder to move as indicated by the smaller treatment effects.

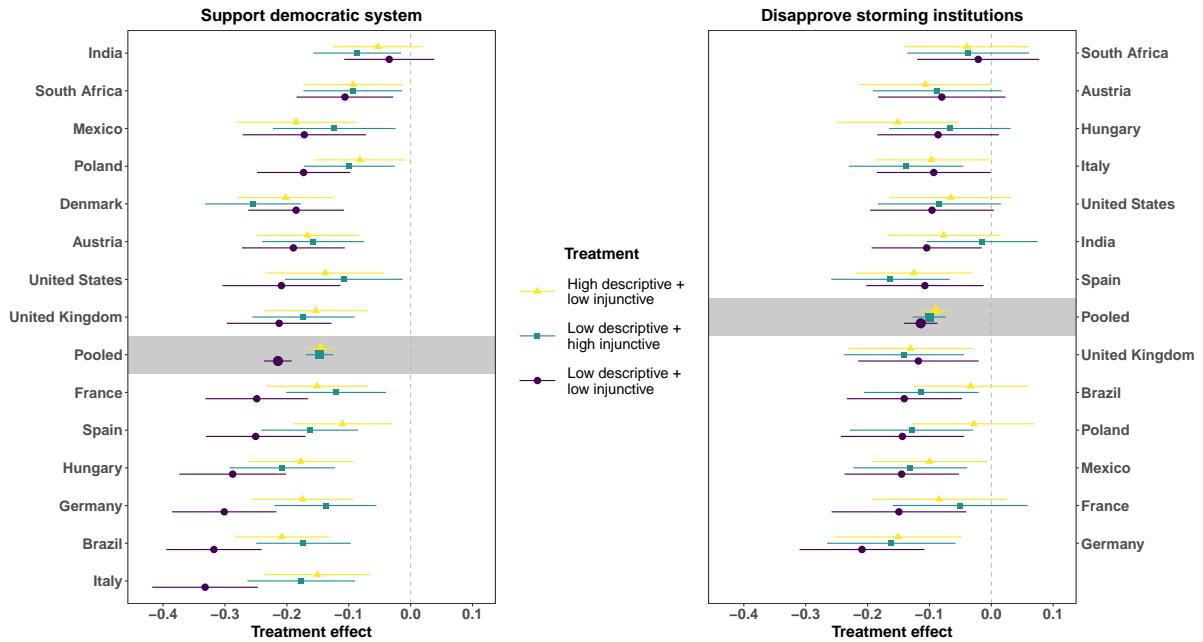
It is important to note that across all countries, the vast majority of respondents do support democracy and disapprove of storming its institutions, independent of the norm conditions. These people are true and convinced democrats, which is good news for democracy. However, for democra-

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<sup>15</sup>[Figure SI 7](#) shows that all these findings are robust to controlling for respondents' pre-treatment support for democracy and storming institutions, respectively.

## 6 Conditionality of preferences

**Figure 7:** Revealing conditionality using vignettes, OLS findings split by country



Note: Reported are OLS coefficients (point estimates) along with their 95% confidence intervals (whiskers).

cies to remain stable, it is crucial that these true democrats also publicly speak out for democracy and sanction those who want to challenge its institutions. To assess whether this is the case, we investigate whether or not respondents would be willing to share their preferences in public in the fictitious country we described. SI.6.4 reports the effects. Worryingly, citizens become less inclined to share their opinions publicly when descriptive and/or injunctive norms are low. This effect is driven by respondents who still report to privately support democracy and disapprove of the storming of political institutions.

All in all, this suggests that citizens do not only become less likely to support democracy and its institutions when they perceive low descriptive and/or injunctive norms in relation to democracy. Instead, those who continue to support it are less likely to make the case for democracy in public. This, in turn, might induce other citizens to also perceive lower societal support for democracy, which then might unleash a trickle-down effect if more and more people oppose democracy or stop standing up for it. Therefore, democracy might come under pressure if people continue to systematically underestimate the support of democracy in their country, as the descriptive findings from the first part of our analyses suggest.

### Additional quasi-experimental evidence

Finally, in [SI.7](#) we report another test of the conditionality by relying on observational data from the European Values Study (EVS) 2017. The EVS randomly assigned the interview mode in six of the countries studied.<sup>16</sup> While private interview modes should decrease feelings of social desirability, face-to-face modes should do the exact opposite ([Ejaz and Thornton 2023](#); [Malik and Siddiqui 2024](#)). We rely on these differences and test whether support for democracy is higher in face-to-face interviews. Across all countries we find that respondents show higher support for democracy when interviewed face-to-face. These findings further underpin our results that conditionality can be observed in relation to support for democracy. We discuss these findings in more detail in the SI.

## 7 Conclusion

Is there a “social consensus” for democracy and how does the social aspect of democratic norms matter for citizens’ own attitudes and behavior? This paper takes the social element of democratic norms seriously and contributes to the debate on the apparent mismatch between citizens’ general support for a democratic system and recent undemocratic behavior observed across established democracies.

First, we find that a social consensus does exist across 14 established democracies, but that this consensus concerns general and abstract democratic norms or a minimalist - electoral - definition of democracy. While these social norms are strong, we find however that they tend to be underestimated. When it comes to the more specific, liberal aspect of democratic norms, such as the boundaries of freedom of speech, or the protection of minorities, citizens do not identify such social consensus as theorized by Almond and Verba ([1965](#)).

Second, we show that the extent of these social democratic norms vary in important ways across social groups in society. Younger generations, as well as supporters of radical right parties, do not perceive such social consensus for democracy. We posit that this (mis)perception may be due to the social networks these groups are socialized in and exposed to, which may have much more contrasted views on the definition and boundaries of democratic norms compared to the broader society.

Finally, we show that this strength and variation of social democratic norms matter for citizens’

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<sup>16</sup>Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Netherlands.

## References

attitudes. We find causally that citizens' democratic norms are conditional to these social norms. Importantly for the strength and stability of democratic norms, our results show that a significant share of citizens may have own their democratic attitudes swayed by a perceived change in the social consensus for democracy.

Overall, our findings provide an important contribution to the field, showing comparative and extensive evidence of the state and importance of democratic *social* norms. The implications of our findings are both reassuring and raising a number of concerns for the resilience of citizens' democratic norms. On the one hand, a strong social consensus on democracy, being the "only game in town", exists in established democracies. On the other hand, the specific norms of democracies may be more contested, and quick redefinitions of social norms may significantly sway an important number of citizens' democratic attitudes. Most worrying is the finding that many citizens mis-perceive social norms on democracy: they believe that less citizens support it than actual is the case. As our experimental finding shows this constitutes a shortcut to calling democracy into question; and as research on other topics has shown, might make it more likely that larger groups of citizens do not act in favor of democracy when push comes to shove (Bursztyn et al. 2023).

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**Supporting Information:**

*How Citizens Perceive Others: The Role of Social Norms for  
Democracies*

## **SI Supporting Information**

### **Contents**

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## **SI.1 Our survey questions**

### **SI.1.1 Key questions on democracy:**

Respondents will be asked about **their** opinion on the following eight items. Before we ask them to share **their perception of others (social norms)** in relation to the eight items.

1. Democracy may have its problems, but it is better than any other form of government
2. Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections is a good way of governing this country
3. Having the army rule is a good way of governing this country
4. Having a democratic political system is a good way of governing this country
5. Elections are a good way of solving disagreements between people
6. Sometimes it is necessary to use violent means such as storming political institutions
7. Freedom of speech should have strict limits to protect vulnerable individuals and groups
8. Hostility against \*minorities\* is sometimes justified, even if it ends up in violence
9. This country would be better able to [Performance Condition] if the government [(Un)democratic Behaviour]<sup>17</sup>

Just like the EVS we use a four-point response scale:

1. disagree strongly
2. disagree somewhat
3. agree somewhat
4. agree strongly

### **SI.1.2 Questions on social norms in relation to democratic support:**

#### **Descriptive social norms:**

Now that you have shared your own evaluations, we would like you to **think of society as a whole**.

We will ask the previous question to 100 people in your country. If you had to guess, **how many of them will say that they agree** with each of the following statements?

*Scale: Slider 0-100 percent*

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<sup>17</sup>**Performance Condition :** (1) lower current levels of inflation, (2) handle the climate crisis, (3) handle threats from Russia, (4) handle natural disasters, (5) fight crime

**(Un)democratic Behaviour:** (1) did not have to bother with elections and concerns of getting re-elected, (2) did not have to have bills and laws passed through parliament, (3) could avoid judicial review by courts, (4) could more easily compromise freedom of speech and assembly

**Injunctive social norms:**

One thing is other people's opinions. We now want to ask you about **what you think other people think is the appropriate opinion to have.**

If you had to guess, out of 100 people in your country, how many will say that **people ought to agree** with each the following statements

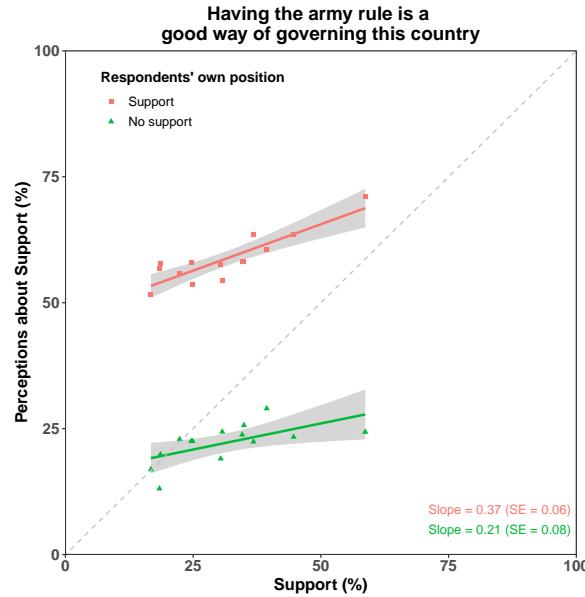
*Scale: Slider 0-100 percent*

Since previous research suggests that respondents struggle to perceive the differences between descriptive and injunctive norms both question batteries will be introduced by a separate screen outlining to respondents in text and visually what they are expected to think of.

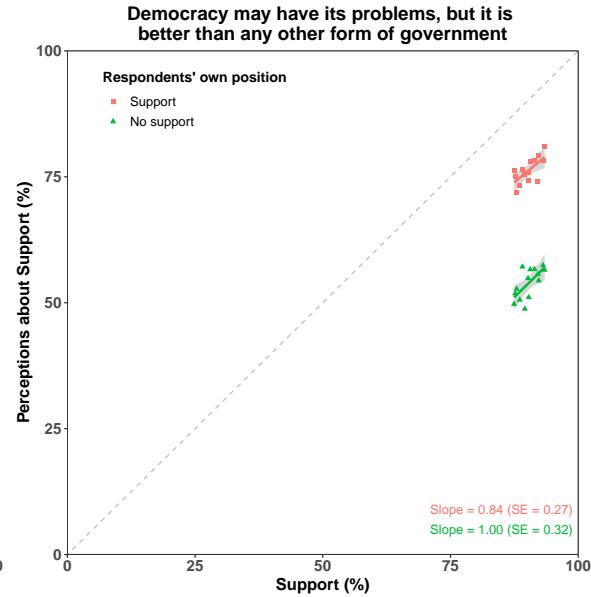
## SI.2 Testing projection descriptively

**Figure SI 1:** Testing projection

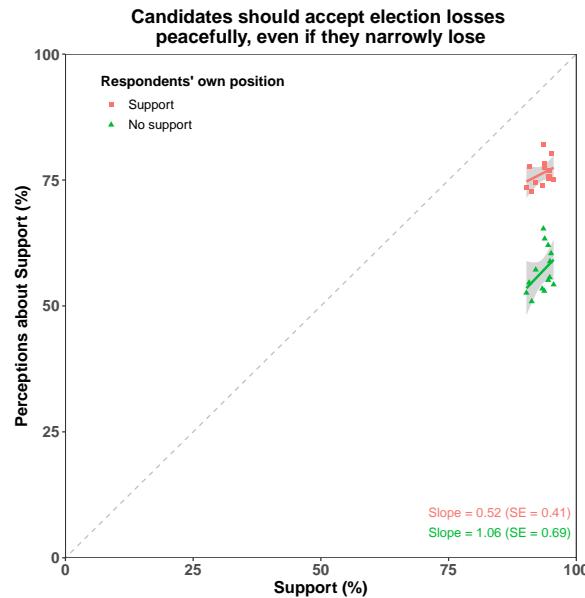
(a) Army rule



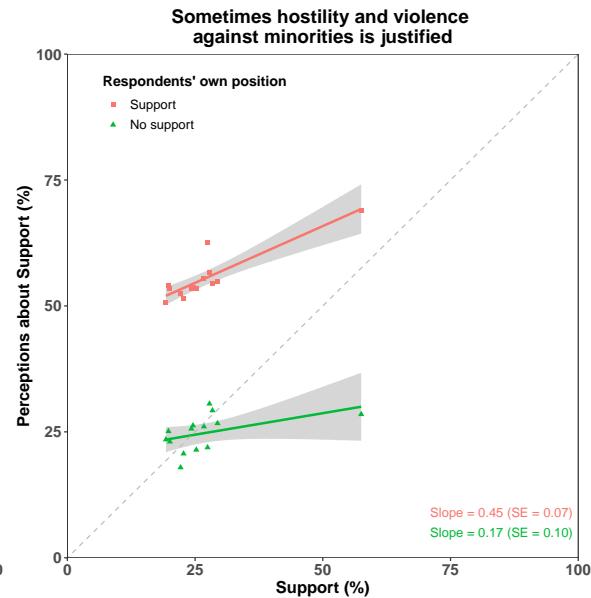
(b) Churchill trade-off



(c) Accept election losses

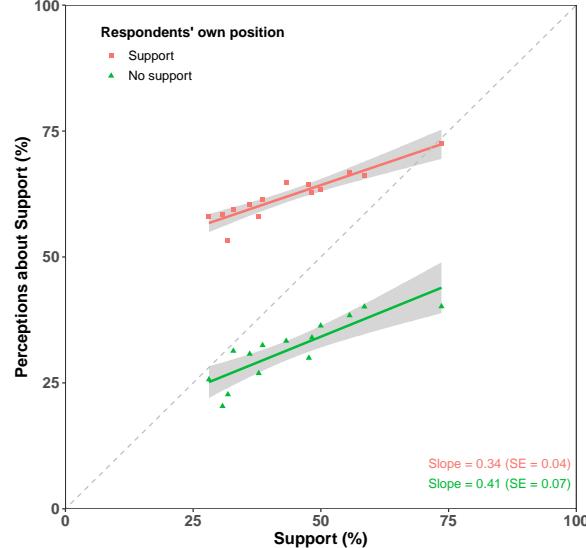


(d) Hostility towards minorities



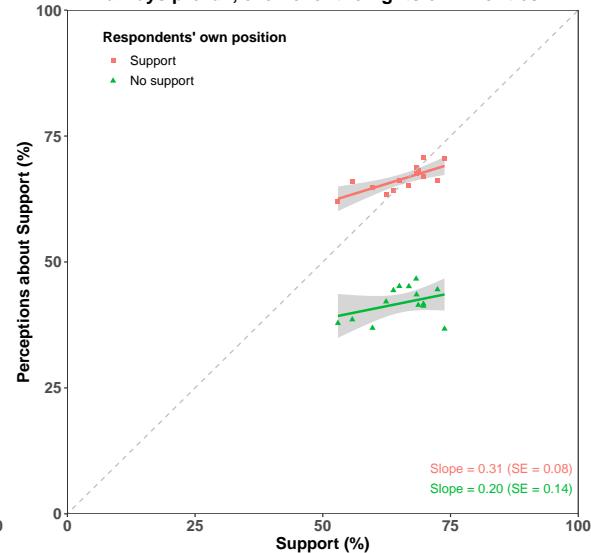
(e) Strong leader

**Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections is a good way of governing this country**



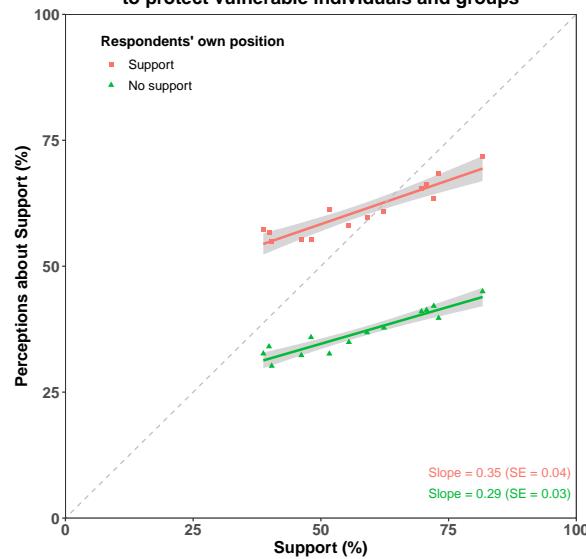
(f) Majority should rule

**The will of the majority should always prevail, even over the rights of minorities**



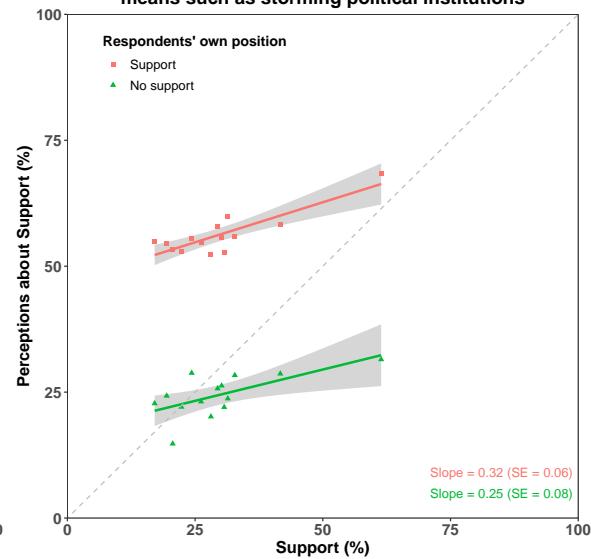
(g) Freedom of speech

**Freedom of speech should have strict limits to protect vulnerable individuals and groups**



(h) Storming institutions

**Sometimes it is necessary to use violent means such as storming political institutions**

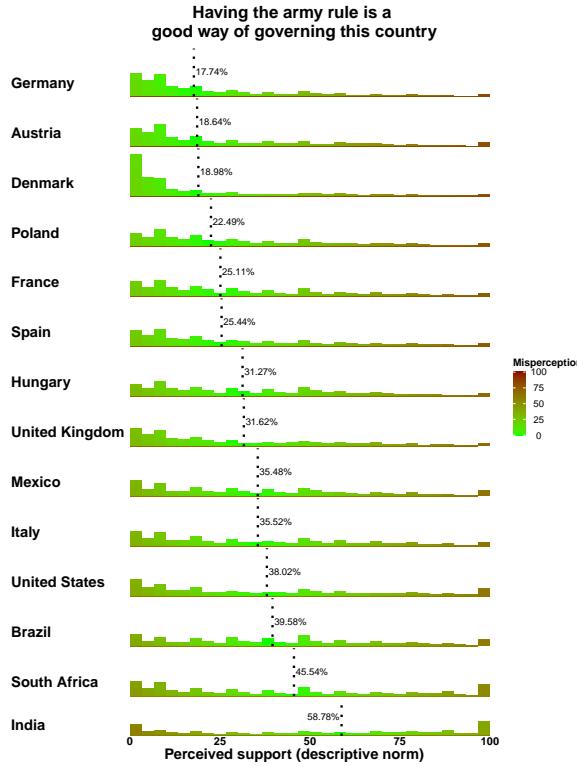


Note: Each marker reports the average support/social norm perception for each country split by support and no support.

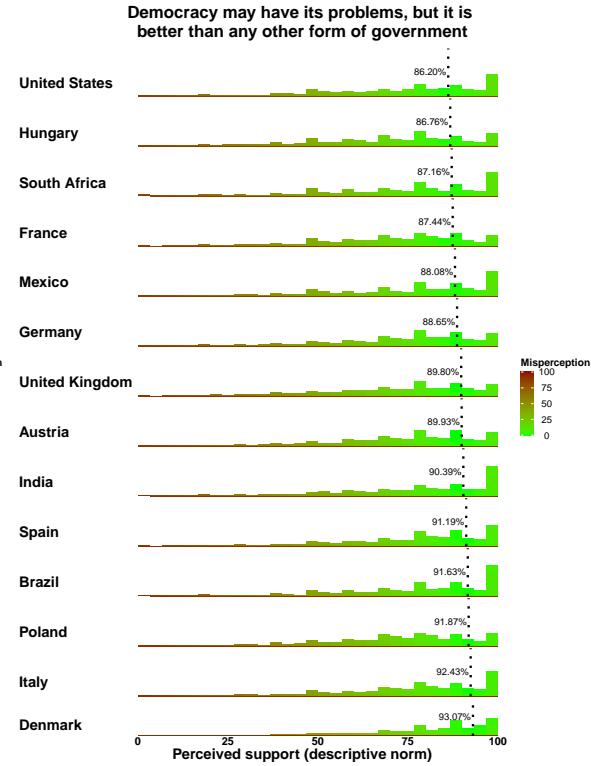
### SI.3 Mis-perception for remaining items

**Figure SI 2:** Social norm perception

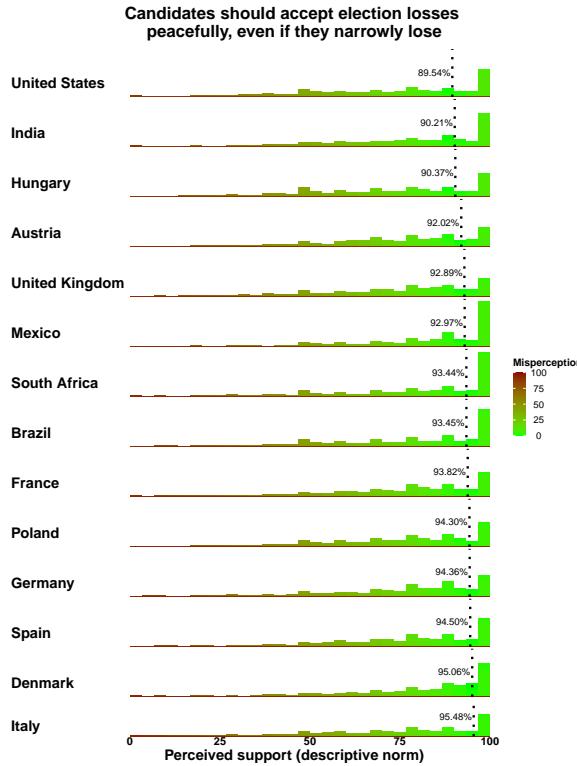
(a) Army rule



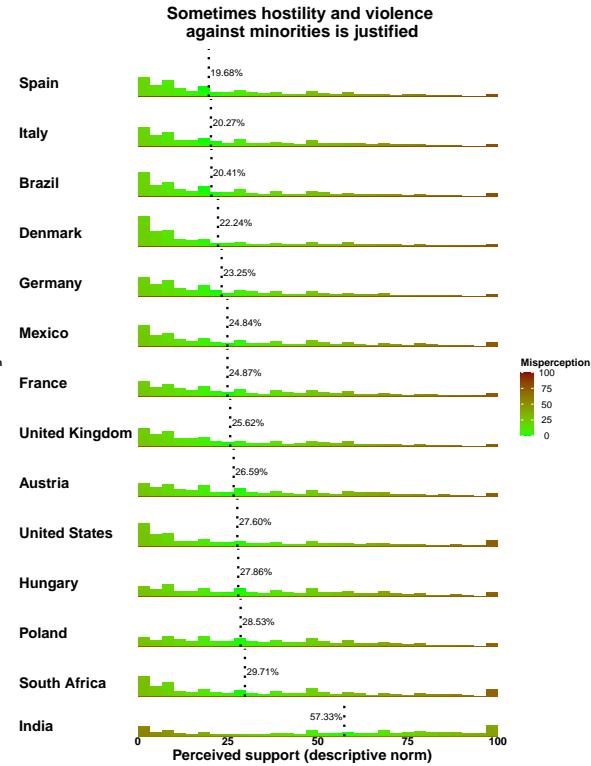
(b) Churchill trade-off

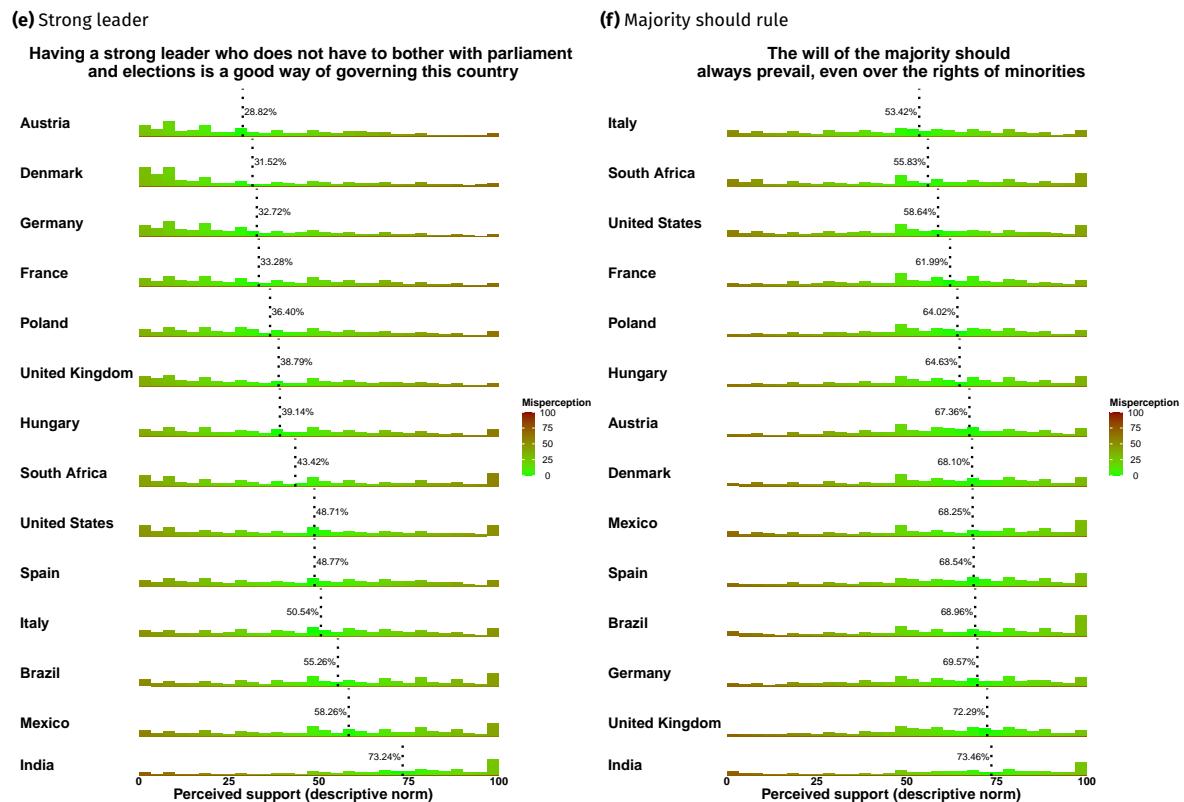


(c) Accept election losses



(d) Hostility towards minorities

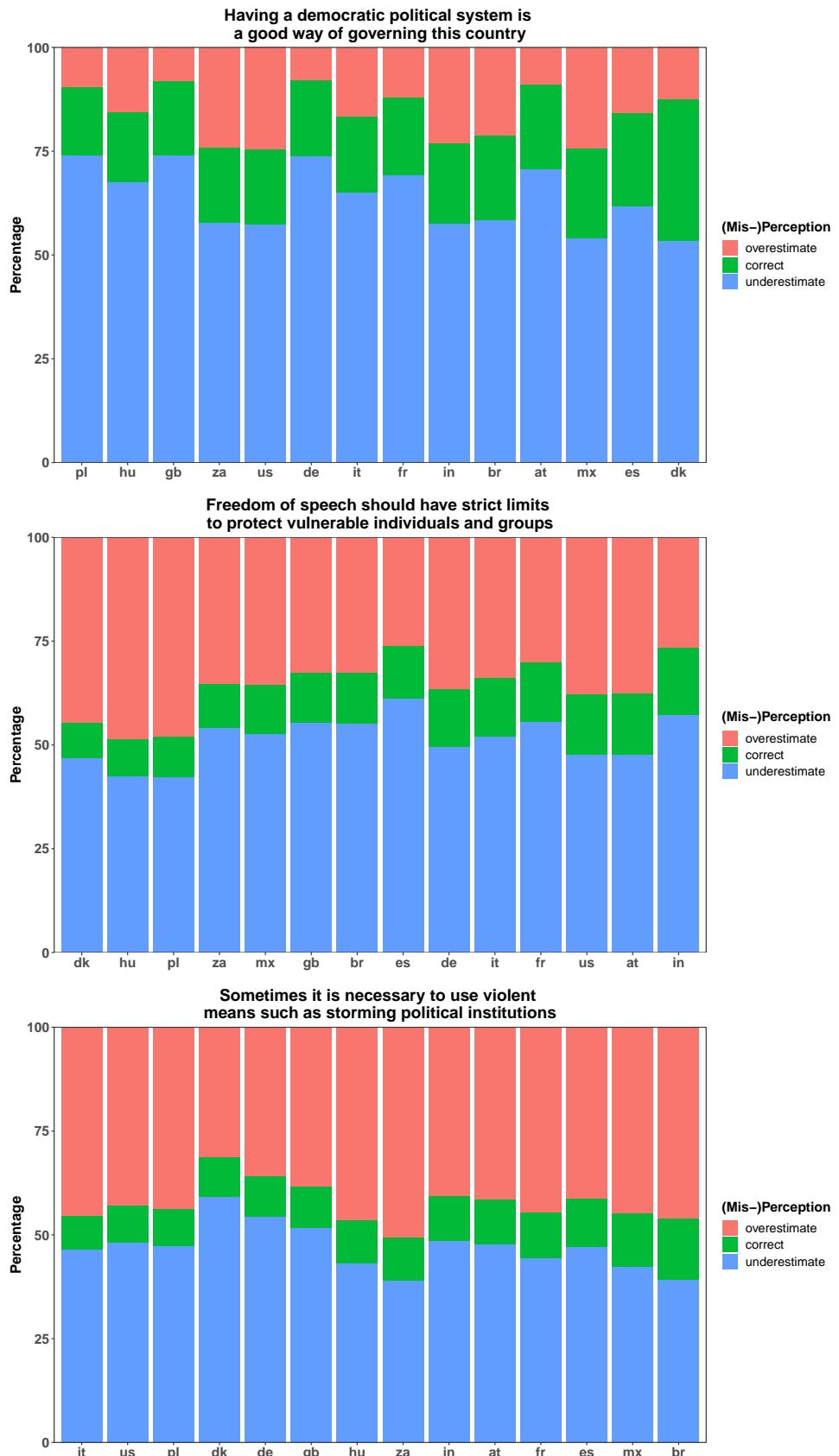




Note: Reported are histograms (perception of others=descriptive social norms) along with the average individual support for each item (dashed line along with % support).

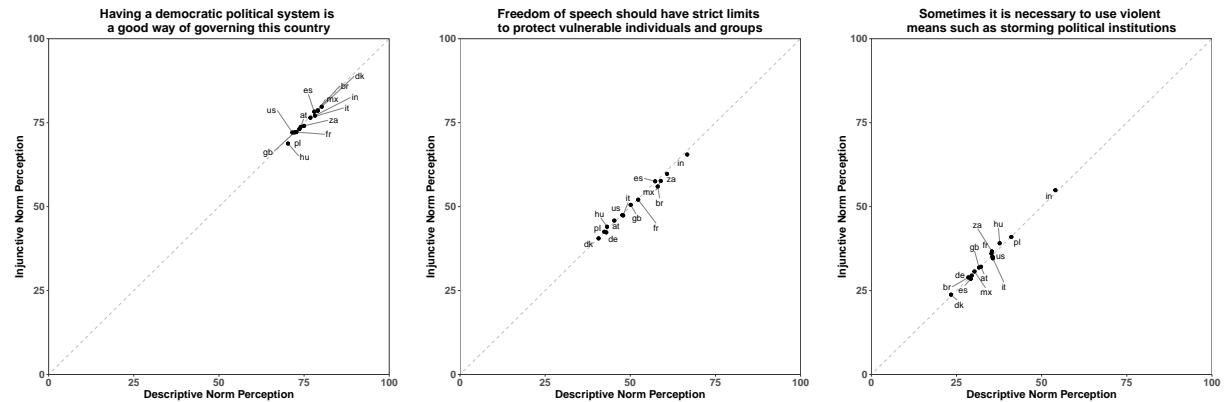
#### SI.4 Under- and over-estimation of support

**Figure SI 3:** Under- and over-estimation of support (binned)



### SI.5 Correlation between descriptive and injunctive social norms

**Figure SI 4:** Correlation between descriptive and injunctive social norms



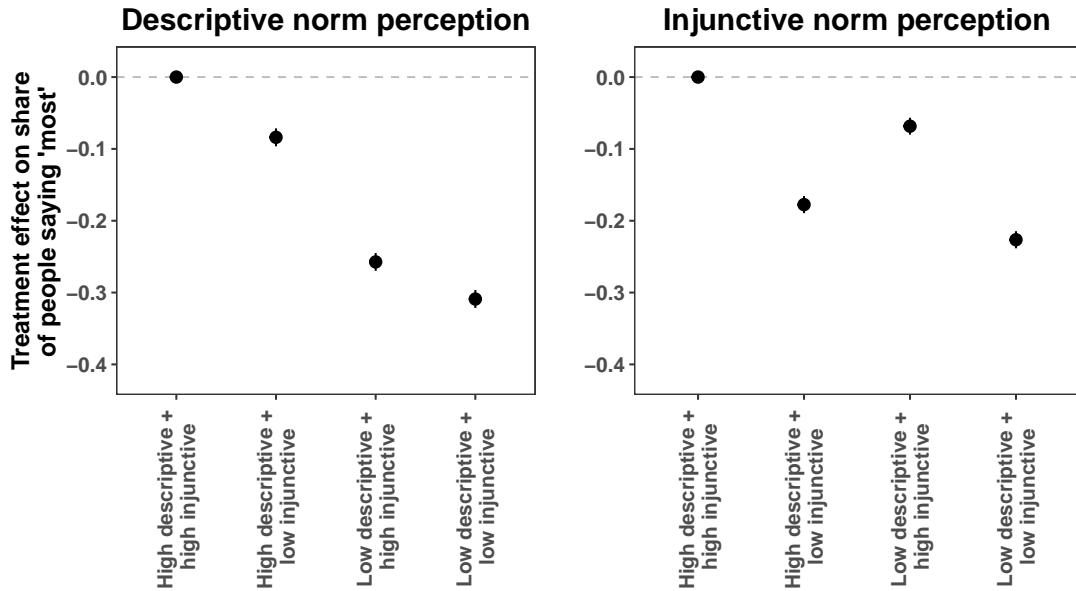
## SI.6 Vignette experiment

### SI.6.1 Manipulation

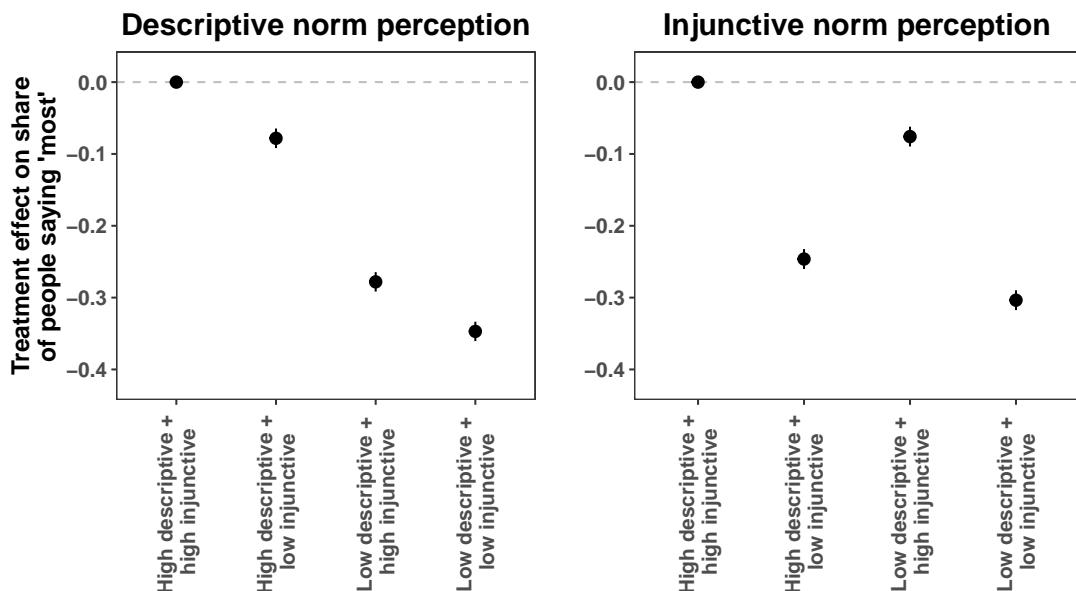
After the vignette experiment, we asked respondents to remind themselves which levels of democratic support our vignettes shared with them. We ask them to indicate both the level of descriptive as well as injunctive social norms shared with them. Below we report four panels in [Figure SI 5](#) showing on the x-axes the treatments respondents received

**Figure SI 5:** Manipulation tests: supporting democracy

(a) descriptive: few



(b) Manipulation tests: storming institutions



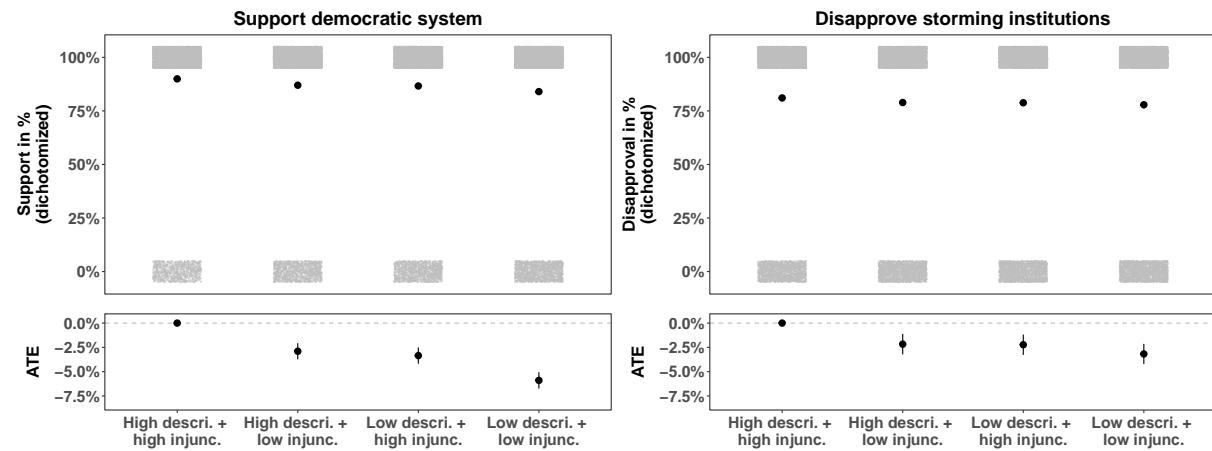
and on the y-axis the OLS coefficients on stating “most” people. What we then hope for is that in the “most” treatment conditions respondents actually are much more likely to also respond with “most”. And we can clearly see that this is

*SI Supporting Information*

the case for all treatment conditions in both experiments and across both social norms. However, they are much more capable of remembering the simple condition of high/high than the more complex mixed conditions.

### SI.6.2 Dichotomized outcomes

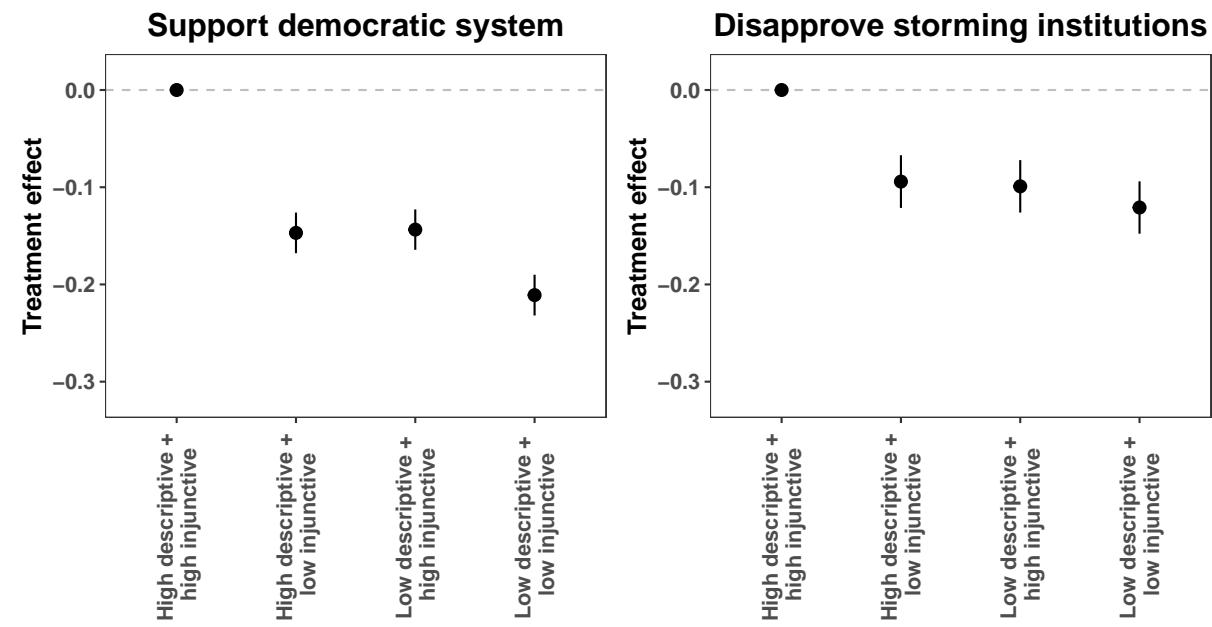
**Figure SI 6:** Conditionality: Dichotomized outcomes



Note: Reported are mean values (upper panels) and OLS coefficients (lower panels) along with their 95% confidence intervals (whiskers) pooled across all fourteen countries.

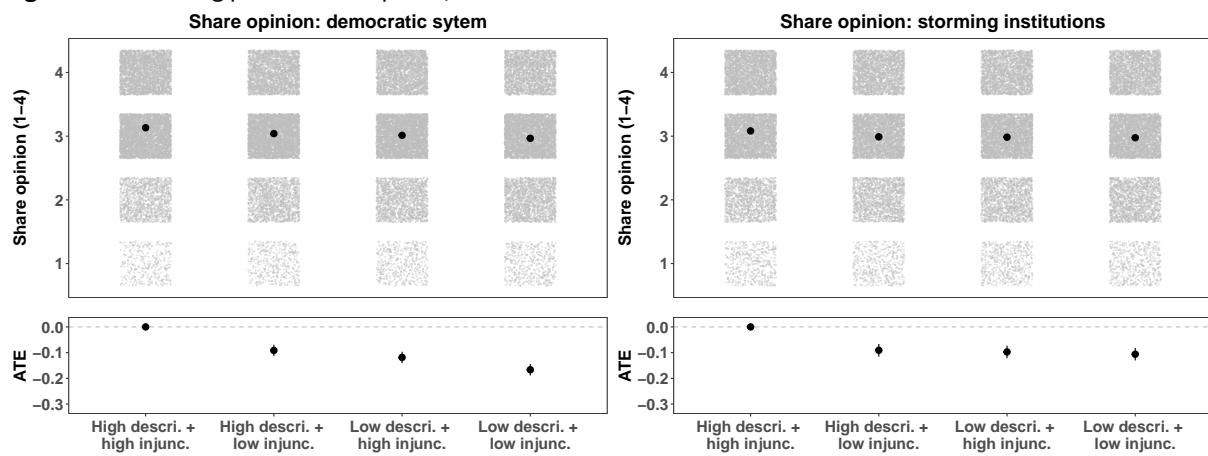
### SI.6.3 Robustness check: Controlling for pre-treatment levels

**Figure SI 7:** Robustness check: Controlling for pre-treatment levels of democratic support/approval of storming institutions



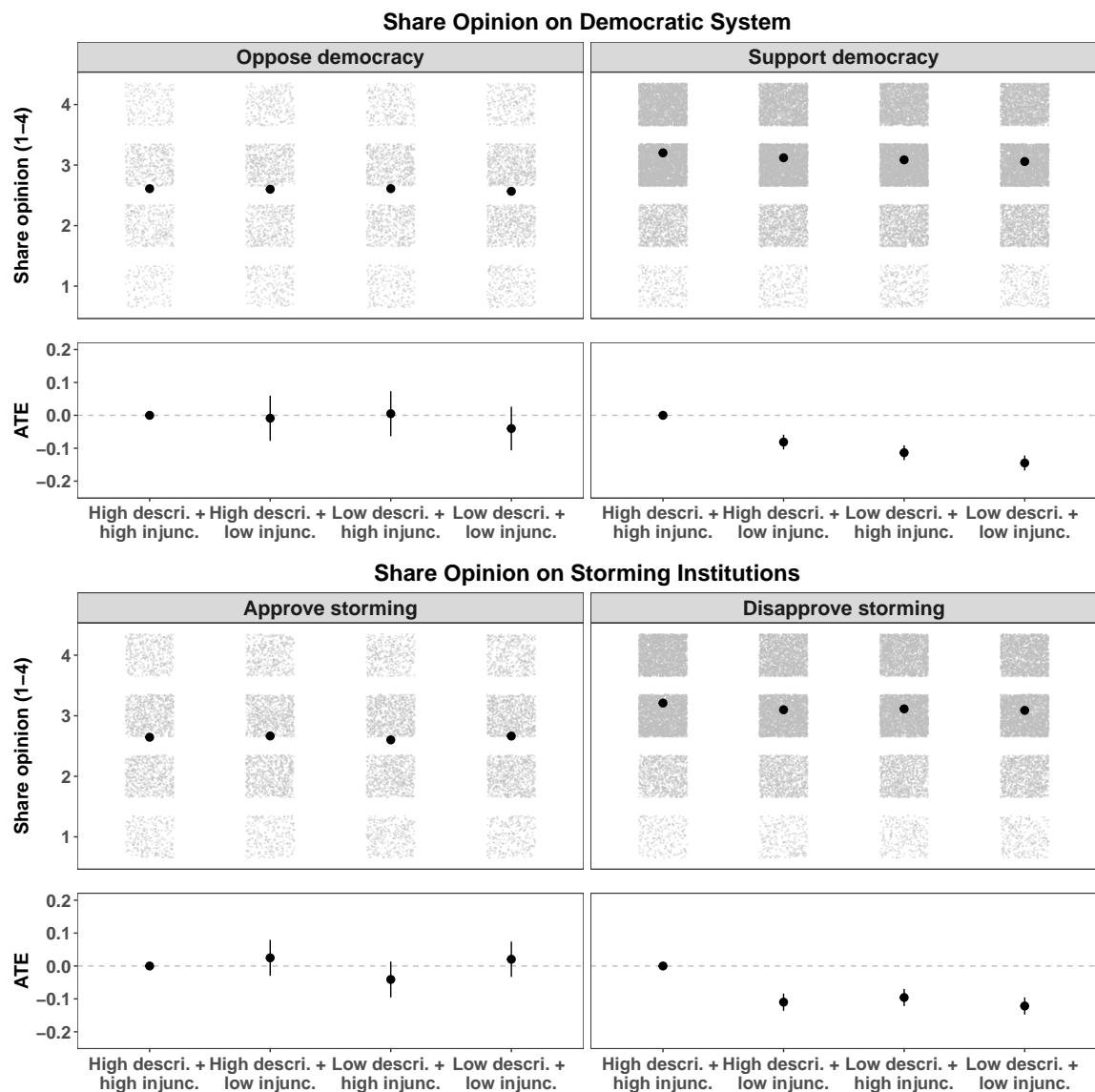
#### SI.6.4 Revealing preferences

**Figure SI 8:** Revealing preferences in public, OLS estimates



Note: Reported are mean values (upper panels) and OLS coefficients (lower panels) along with their 95% confidence intervals (whiskers) pooled across all fourteen countries.

**Figure SI 9:** Revealing preferences: Subgroups



Note: ...

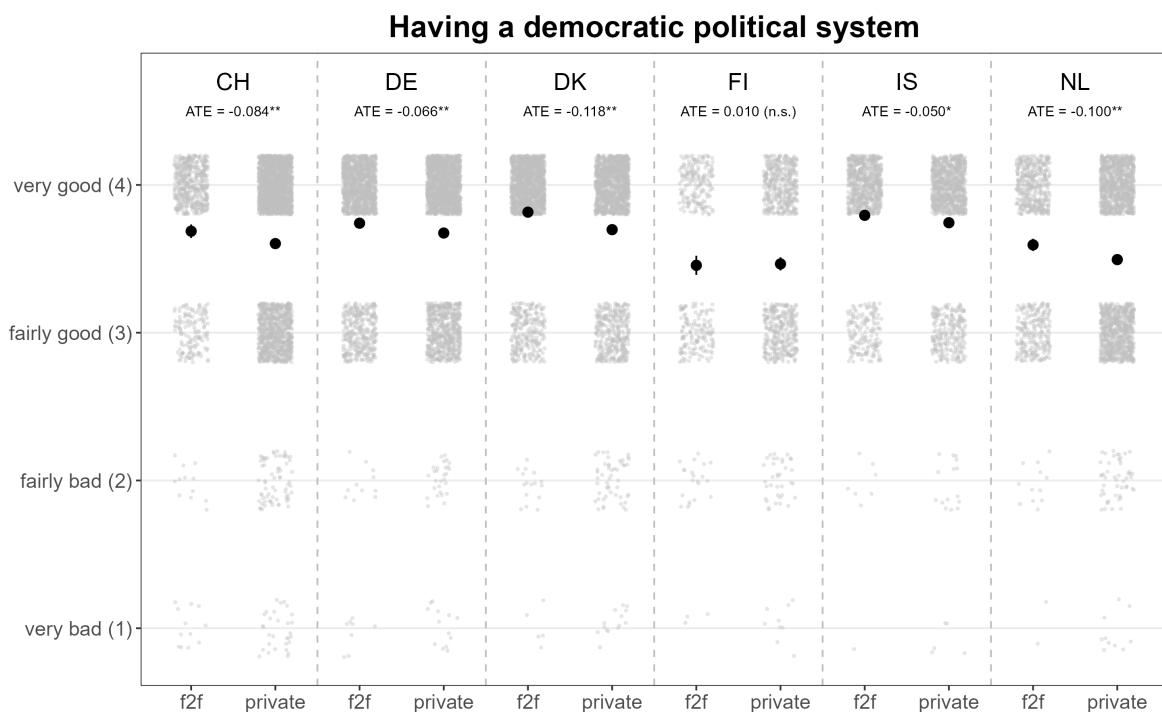
### SI.7 Randomized interview mode in the EVS

The European Values Study 2017 allows us to provide another test of the conditionality argument we present above. The EVS randomized the interview mode within a subset of countries: some respondents were interviewed face-to-face while others answered in private.

Arguably being interviewed by someone else should raise not only the awareness for socially desirable behavior but also affect respondents' answers in a specific way. We believe that in the case of democracy respondents should become more likely to support democracy when being interviewed, while support for democracy should be lower if respondents answer in private.

[Figure SI 10](#) reports the differences in means across interview modes split by the six countries for which the EVS randomized the interview modes.

**Figure SI 10:** Face-to-face vs. private interview mode in the EVS 2017



The patterns we then observe are exactly as suggested above: In all countries but Finland we observe a significant drop in support for democracy when respondents answered in private. This again underlines the conditionality argument we develop in this paper and shows that strikingly similar patterns emerge once we leave the experimental world we used for our study design. The fundamental advantage of our design lies in the fact that the vignette experiments are arguably less prone to compound treatment effects. For a more detailed discussion of such issues please consult [?](#).

### SI.8 Links to PAP

We provide the links to our pre-registrations and analysis plans below. We fielded the surveys sequentially, wherefore we also pre-registered in four rounds (listed in order).

## *SI Supporting Information*

- Denmark: [https://osf.io/jqrp2/?view\\_only=c61bf158d09745fc90bca7997e684293](https://osf.io/jqrp2/?view_only=c61bf158d09745fc90bca7997e684293)
- Germany, France, US, and UK: [https://osf.io/nz9em?view\\_only=c0b451a9fd3b47b8a68bf4f236de3eb1](https://osf.io/nz9em?view_only=c0b451a9fd3b47b8a68bf4f236de3eb1)
- Poland, Mexico, Hungary, Spain and Brazil: [https://osf.io/zpfm4?view\\_only=db4214f747524df7b3b7f04dbe4f6a6f](https://osf.io/zpfm4?view_only=db4214f747524df7b3b7f04dbe4f6a6f)
- South Africa, India, Italy, and Austria: [https://osf.io/wteg3?view\\_only=34799bd39c464faca8b283c443d8a09e](https://osf.io/wteg3?view_only=34799bd39c464faca8b283c443d8a09e)