(Mis-)Perceiving Support for Democracy: The Role of Social Norms for Democracies

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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 this social 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). Based on this, we provide a theoretical framework and derive observable implications of which country- and individual-level characteristics structure social democratic norms. Using existing surveys and large-scale original survey experiments, we will then measure these democratic norms in up to 15 democracies. 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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1 Introduction

Contemporary democracies are facing challenges from within. For example, the US Capitol was stormed by a violent mob, and in some democracies like Poland, both elites and citizens have questioned the rule of law. Additionally, authoritarian candidates such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, and former US President Donald Trump are gaining popularity. These events have led some scholars to suggest that "norms" in our societies are eroding, among both elites and the public (Konnikova 2017; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). This conclusion is based on the observation that political elites are becoming more willing to challenge fundamental political institutions and taboos, such as elections or the taboo against authoritarian policies that exclude minorities. Meanwhile, citizens are voting for populist and authoritarian leaders and are willing to speak out and act against democratic institutions in public.

Recent experimental research testifies to this willingness to support undemocratic politicians (e.g. Graham and Svolik 2020). In stark contrast, both past and recent research on citizens' support for democracy has found little change in public support for democratic institutions (Inglehart 2003; Armingeon and Guthmann 2014; Brug et al. 2021; Schaffner 2020; Voeten 2017; Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2022; Norris 2017; Claassen 2020). Time and again, citizens in liberal democracies overwhelmingly express support for democracy as their preferred system of governance when surveyed. This presents us with a paradox: *how can we reconcile the fact of sustained and stable support for democracy with the extreme challenges it faces in several contemporary societies?*

We aim to provide a potential explanation for resolving the paradox by introducing the concept of a "social norm" for democracy to the study of democratic support. In social psychology, researchers emphasize that individual behavior and preferences are driven by descriptive norms about what other people do and injunctive norms about what other people ought to do (e.g. Bicchieri 2016). Lately, political scientists have increased their interest in studying exactly these social norms as well – specifically when seeking to explain the rise of radical right parties and voters (e.g. Bischof and Wagner 2019; Valentim 2021; Dinas, Martínez, and Valentim 2022; Alvarez-Benjumea and Valentim 2022; Colombo 2022; Malik and Siddiqui 2023). We argue that citizens' support for political institutions is not immune but conditional to social norms; *how citizens evaluate democracy depends on their perspective of how other citizens evaluate democracy.* We argue that this social norm is exactly

what classical literature has termed as a “social consensus”, but so far has failed to measure it and, therefore, lacks an understanding of its repercussions.

We argue that in a context of strong perceived social consensus on support for democracy, many citizens may express support for democratic institutions in surveys and their behavior (what we shall call “revealed preferences”), but simultaneously hold strong sentiments against democratic institutions. These individuals are “fake democrats” who conform to a strong social norm in favor of democracy, but may eventually reveal their authoritarian preferences if their perception of existing social norms changes.

Conversely, perceiving a weaker social norm in relation to democracy should make these "fake-democrats" more likely to reveal anti-democratic values. Importantly, such perceptions of other citizens’ support for democracy, are likely to be driven by misperceptions (Bursztyn and Yang 2021), meaning that citizens might *underestimate* the actual support for democratic institutions in their country. Such a change of perception might be rooted in elite behavior, e.g. Donald Trump mobilizing his supporters (Bursztyn, Egorov, and Fiorin 2020), or a shift in perception of social norms in a person’s reference group (personal network). Building on these ideas we provide a theoretical framework along with observable implications for our future empirical research to be carried out during summer 2023.

To understand the role of social norms for democratic support our research proceeds in two steps. First, to understand perceived democratic norms in societies we will rely on existing surveys and an original large-scale survey design covering up to 15 democracies. Our survey design not only asks questions in relation to perceived democratic norms but also randomly induces feelings of social desirability; which arguably should influence respondents’ answers if a social norm in relation to democracy exists. This then allows us to map (mis-)perceptions of democratic support, both in its descriptive and injunctive form, across these countries *(description)*.

Second, based on these findings, we will then seek to develop survey and field experimental designs allowing us to strengthen social norms in relation to democracy.

To understand if and to what extent social norms play a role for democratic support, we then develop two empirical designs and provide early results. For both designs and in contrast to most existing work (e.g. Skaaning and Krishnarajan 2021), our approach is that we – due to our focus

on norms – conceive of social desirability as something of substantial interest, rather than a bias to get rid of, to measure democratic support. First, we use existing surveys with variations in the interview mode within the same country and survey. The idea behind this approach is that more private interview modes should reduce social desirability pressures, while personal interview modes such as face-to-face should increase them (see: Valentim 2023; Malik and Siddiqui 2023). The 2017 Europan Values Study (EVS) randomly varied interview modes and allows us to get a first insight into how relevant social norms are across six democracies and which individual-level characteristics correlate with stronger social norms. Second, we provide the design for an experimental approach across 15 countries which we seek to field this summer. In these surveys, respondents are randomly assigned to a treatment condition that seeks to increase their feeling to reveal preferences that match existing social norms. We describe five such treatments which we seek to test in a pre-test this spring.

The findings of our first analysis of the EVS 2017 reveal a strong social desirability bias in favor of democracy in all but one country (Finland) out of six: respondents are less supportive of the democratic systems in Denmark, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, and Switzerland if they are interviewed in a private instead of a face-to-face mode. In four of the five countries, respondents become even more likely to reveal opposition to the democratic idea. Furthermore, Danish (letting the army rule; support of a strong leader) as well as Swiss respondents (letting experts rule) show considerably higher support for alternative political systems when interviewed privately. Most importantly for us, the patterns of a private interview mode align across the six countries we study: respondents are more critical of democracy if interviewed privately. Furthermore, varying the interview mode appears to be a fairly weak treatment for perceived social desirability in comparison to the treatments contained in our own survey design. Thus, it is likely that social desirability bias will be larger in our future research relying on original surveys.

The idea of a "social consensus" in relation to democratic support has been a key cornerstone in the literature on democratic stability. Yet, until today a full conceptual, theoretical, and empirical integration of such an idea is missing. We simply do not know whether or not such a consensus exists and how it varies across societal and individual contexts. With our research, we seek to contribute towards filling these gaps. First, by developing a conceptual and theoretical framework showcasing

how social norms might matter for democratic support as outlined in this paper. Second, by providing first insights that social desirability in relation to democratic support does in fact exist and is likely driven by social norms. Third, our future research will provide rich descriptive evidence for the (mis-)perception of democratic support across up to 15 democracies. This then will also allow us to provide correlational evidence on which individual- and country-level factors might drive citizens' perception of democratic support.

2 Literature

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 lays 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 it citizens. The classical works also then triggered the rich empirical descriptions about democratic support in democracies provided by what is frequently referred to "civil 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)[1] – report a high support for democracy: citizens in liberal democracies outline overwhelming support for democracy as their system of governance (Claassen 2020; Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2022; Voeten 2017; Inglehart 2003).

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, these studies are based upon the idea that *individual support* is key to understanding system legitimacy: that a society within which the majority supports

[1] Replication studies show little support of the claim that democratic support is in crisis (e.g. Voeten 2017).

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. For instance, 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, the "norm" for democracy.

The key critique we bring forward 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 civil 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'.

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; Braley et al. 2022), as we focus on the overarching norm of supporting democracy as a system. Typically, 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. Revealed support for 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 Theoretical Framework

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. Social norms are mainly defined by external costs; the fear of being sanctioned by others for one’s opinions and attitudes (Bicchieri 2016). Thereby two different kinds of norms are differentiated: descriptive norms *(beliefs about what other people do)* and injunctive norms *(beliefs about what other people “ought to do”)* (Bicchieri 2016). Following this idea, we believe, allows us to understand how a “consensus” for democracy is being created, how it is shaped across countries and which challenges it might face.

Translated to the concept of democracy, we can imagine two key norms: *First, one may think that most people in advanced democracies support democratic institutions (descriptive).* Descriptive norms are based on our impressions of how other people behave, and what they do and not do. This set of descriptive beliefs is key to human behavior: research across the board has shown that such descriptive norms are key to decreasing tax fraud (Wenzel 2005) and littering in public (Winter and Zhang 2018). Most importantly, research on “get out the vote” has already emphasized its importance for behavior within democracies (Karpowitz et al. 2011; Panagopoulos, Larimer, and Condon 2014; Doherty et al. 2017; Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008; Gerber and Rogers 2009). In their seminal study, Gerber, Green, and Larimer (2008) show by using a field experiment that citizens become more likely to vote if voting information is shared with their neighbors; which they read as support for the idea that descriptive norms drive voter behavior during elections. However, the role of descriptive norms in relation to democratic support remains unknown even though scholars (Lipset 1959, 1994; Almond and Verba 1965) and journalists (Konnikova 2017) heavily emphasize the importance of descriptive norms – admittedly, though, not explicitly referring to the term.

Second, one may think that most people also believe that one ought to support democracy and its institutions (injunctive). Injunctive norms describe what individuals perceive others *should do*. Overall, injunctive norms are less well studied across the Social Sciences; but they have been shown to be less context-dependent than descriptive norms and, thus, to travel outside of the environment

they are activated in (Reid and Aiken 2013: 551). Recently, scholarship on turnout has turned its interest towards injunctive norms: Fieldhouse, Cutts, and Bailey (2020) show that voters are turning out in larger numbers if they perceive they ought to do so but mostly so if the injunctive pressure stems from co-partisans. Again, to the best of our knowledge there is no empirical research testing the role of injunctive norms in relation to democratic support. Yet, again the conceptual idea is that there is a normative component to democratic values and behavior is 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 an anti-fascist taboo without the attitudes and values of the population changing overnight.

How social norms matter for democracy: misperception and revealed preferences

The cornerstone of our theoretical framework is what previous research has called the "social consensus" of democracy (Almond and Verba 1965: Chapter 1). We conceptualize this social consensus as a second-order preference: *citizens' perception of how many fellow citizens support democracy.*[2] This perception is then comprised of a descriptive component ("how many others do support it") and an injunctive component ("how many others believe one ought to support it").

The most relevant first step in our argument and question is, however, how *accurate* citizens' perceptions are. Time and again, especially research in economics (Bursztyn and Yang 2021; Broockman and Skovron 2018) shows that citizens hold strong misperceptions about others' preferences. In turn, these misperceptions can drive citizens' own values; for instance by making them less likely to support democracy because they perceive that other citizens do not support democracy (even though they actually do). It is, thus, crucial to measure this social consensus, both on the descriptive and the injunctive dimension, in order to understand if citizens' perceptions of others are accurate or not.

Irrespective of their (mis-)perception, the perceived social consensus should have strong repercussions on citizens and their support for democracy. This second step is the core of our argument: that *social norms in relation to democracy affect citizens' support for democracy.* Table 1 gives a

[2] As we lay out in our research design section, this perception can stretch across several aspects of democratic institutions, from elections all the way to freedom of the press.

stylized overview of our conceptual idea. We argue that support for democracy is based upon two preferences: *a revealed one and a private, "true" preference.* In their concepts and theories, existing research on democratic support almost exclusively focuses on the diagonal concepts in our prototypical conceptualization: true authoritarians and true democrats. However, as discussed above, scholarship then measures *revealed preferences* only; it measures the preferences citizens *are willing to share* if asked about their opinion regarding democracy.

Revealed preferences are not independent of social norms; in fact, they are likely to be affected by descriptive and injunctive norms to the extent that citizens might fear that their private preferences could be perceived as unfavorable by others. Put differently: in societies with solid social norms in favor of democracy, anti-democratic citizens are likely to feel pressured into revealing support for democracy even though they have strong doubts or even authoritarian viewpoints. In Table 1 these are the citizens we label as "fake democrats". Detecting fake democrats in existing surveys is close to

Table 1: Revealed and "true" democratic preferences create four prototypical system supporters

		True preference	
		anti	pro
Revealed	anti	True Authoritarian	Fake Authoritarian
	pro	**Fake Democrat**	**True Democrat**

Note: "pro" and "anti" stand for pro- and anti-democratic preferences.

impossible as we simply lack the tools and measurements to learn how many such fake democrats do exist in contemporary societies. However, fake democrats are likely to keep their eyes open for information or reference points in our societies suggesting to them to be able to eventually reveal their "true" preferences, to act on their authoritarian values. While such information or reference points might be scarce in contemporary democracies, they do exist: politicians undermining democracy are gaining votes and previous research has already pinpointed to the fact that their success affects social norms and thereby motivating fake democrats to act on their true preferences.

In this understanding of democracy as a social endeavor, the dilemma portrayed by fake democrats – the mismatch between their private (true) and revealed preferences – is key to stabilizing democratic systems. Here we expand on previous theoretical arguments emphasizing that democracies are stable

and functioning not only because citizens support their institutions but also because citizens learn on a daily basis how democracy works (Putnam 1993). Putnam already emphasizes that engaging with fellow citizens in social organizations helps citizens to accept diverse and contradicting viewpoints. Building on this, we argue that much more than learning about these viewpoints, social interaction, the local surroundings of citizens, train them into perceiving a "social norm for democracy'. In essence, thus, these social norms in favor of democracy can be understood as a cornerstone for democracy given that they sustain democratic principles, such as the acceptance of election results, even for citizens that privately stand orthogonal to democratic principles.[3]

Take for example a "fake democrat', e.g. holding the wish to be governed by a single strong leader, but living in a stable, advanced democracy. This person might want to challenge democratic institutions – potentially via violent means. Yet, given strong social norms, descriptively and injunctively, the person fears being sanctioned by fellow citizens. Instead of revealing their authoritarian values, the person remains within the boundaries of democracy; they cannot turn "true authoritarian" given the strong social norms. The social and local context in which authoritarians live thus determine whether they reveal their preferences. On the one hand, if their perception of fellow citizens and elites suggests that others actively support democracy, authoritarian preferences will remain unrevealed (i.e., as fake democrats). On the other hand, political elites might challenge democratic institutions – by not accepting electoral results or by actively asking their supporters to storm a parliament – or one may perceive that fellow citizens do not support democracy. In the latter case, authoritarians reveal their true preferences. The difference between the two scenarios is not the individuals' preferences, but the social norms the authoritarian perceives.

Fake democrats aside, true democrats are likely to be the largest group of citizens in contemporary democracies. All in all, we have strong reasons to assume that the majority of citizens in democracies truly support their political system and that this support is unconditional to the democratic social norm. For one because most citizens take part in elections and overwhelmingly vote for parties fully supporting democratic institutions, for another as democracy without true democrats is unlikely to be a stable political system. But it nevertheless remains key to understand who these true democrats are and for which reasons they grew into being true democrats. Understanding the background,

[3]This also means that we believe that any given society contains some "fake" democrats which are unlikely to reveal themselves without the relevant triggers/reference points.

socialization process and reference points of true democrats might help us to learn how to convince fake democrats to become true system supporters. True democrats might have also been fake democrats in the past or at least might have had serious concerns in relation to democracy and its institutions.

Finally, fake authoritarians are unlikely to be observed in democratic systems. Yet, they are likely to exist in authoritarian regimes. In fact, they might be of key interest to autocratic leaders and their security apparatuses. In contrast, true authoritarians do exist in democracies, specifically in countries with weak democratic norms.

3.1 Observable implications

Bringing social norms into the research agenda on democratic support allows us to understand in much more detail where citizens' democratic preferences come from; which role socialization processes and local environments play for our democracies. Below we outline both country- and individual-level implications of the theoretical framework we outline above. At this stage, it is important to annotate that currently, we do not differentiate between the effects of descriptive and injunctive social norms. Previous research, specifically in political science, tends to emphasize and show the important role of descriptive norms for individual behavior while the findings for injunctive social norms are best described as mixed. Furthermore, people regularly conflate the two; as such it is important for us to find out whether or not the two concepts are observationally equivalent and can be measured reliably before developing theoretical arguments for both concepts.

3.1.1 Individual-level

The theoretical framework we have outlined so far, all in all, emphasizes very much the individual-level characteristics; the key to our understanding of the democratic consensus starts with individual perceptions of others within the same society. Previous research emphasizes several individual-level factors as correlates of support for democracy such as: education (Przeworski et al. 2000; Acemoglu et al. 2005), media and internet consumption (Carpini and Keeter 1996; Stoycheff 2020), urbanity, and being male to name just a few (for a comprehensive summary, please see: Mattes 2018). The question, however, remains which individual-level characteristics bring about a democratic consensus.

Rather than focusing on socio-demographic characteristics as those mentioned above, we believe that the starting point for democratic norms is an individual's everyday surroundings, in particular their social environments. Arguably, one of the most comprehensive attempts to develop a framework for the effects of local surroundings in relation to democratic support has been provided by Putnam (1993). His foundational idea is that how citizens perceive and interact with democratic institutions is critically affected by their everyday experiences, most crucially how involved citizens are with their surroundings via social organizations. Such active involvement – especially in civil associations and organizations – gives citizens the opportunity to learn and accept norms of reciprocity and civility. Thus, among scholarship on democratic support the work by Putnam might provide the most insightful and extended reasoning on how norms matter for democracy.

Building on this idea, we argue that the key yardstick citizens will use for their perception of democratic norms are their own surroundings: their family, their workplace, and/or their gym partners. Research in social psychology, and then much later in political science, highlights how the social groups we are part of, the norms of interaction within the group and referent persons therein affect our perception of norms; what we perceive as "normal" behavior. In combination with Putnam's (1993) arguments and previous findings on democratic support listed above, this suggests that individuals within the same society might have heavily divergent views on democratic norms: Citizens living in rural places with tightly-knit personal networks and specific associational activities might differ substantially from citizens in urban places with broader networks with much weaker ties. We then suggest that within these networks social referents – e.g. central nodes within an individual's network of friends – are key to understanding and manipulating the perception of democratic norms within our societies.

3.1.2 Country-level

Traditionally research on support for democracy was the study of cross-country comparisons: it was heavily influenced by the observation that democracy and economic development are linked to each other (Lipset 1959; Helliwell 1994; Boix et al. 2003; Doucouliagos and Ulubaşoğlu 2008). Very much from the beginning scholarship observed that democracy was more likely to occur and be stable in societies that did well economically; and in turn that economic crisis provided the breading

grounds for states to slip and fail (Davies 1962; Muller and Seligson 1994). Thus, a fundamental factor influencing how individuals evaluate and support democracy is the well-being of the nation. But these arguments have largely been used to study the transition of authoritarian regimes towards democracy, much less so to study the difference of democratic support across advanced and much more stable democracies.

Thus, while common scholarly wisdom is that support for democracy hinges upon the nation's economic well-being, a second strand of research emphasized the relevance of political factors (Evans and Whitefield 1995; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998; Diamond 1999; Norris and Inglehart 2002; Welzel and Inglehart 2006; Welzel 2007); such as elite-behavior (corruption, trustworthiness, emancipative values) and institutional processes (electoral process, freedom of speech). It is this latter strand of research that is highly relevant to our endeavor to study democratic norms in advanced democracies in which the rather stable factor of economic well-being seems less relevant for democratic support.

In this line of thought, we argue that two country-level factors are specifically relevant to the study of democratic norms – as conceptualized above. First, whether democratic norms are eroding or not should depend to a large extent on elite behavior. For instance, recent empirical research shows that the presence of radical right parties legitimizes extreme values and this then might be a key challenge for democracies (Bischof and Wagner 2019; Valentim 2021). The electoral success of populist leaders may also signal shifting norms cross-nationally, such as the acceptability of racial prejudice (Giani and Méon 2021). Also, most prominently Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) emphasize that how elites behave – whether they accept electoral results, act along democratic habits – is crucial to guide voters and their behavior. Similarly, studies on social norms emphasize the relevance of key referents – such as for instance courts (Tankard and Paluck 2017) – on social norms and attitudes. The idea of these studies is largely a signaling effect (Bicchieri 2016; Valentim 2021) : namely that elites' behavior and/or electoral success signal the social norm to follow. Combining these insights with the studies on democratic support suggests a link between how elites interact with democratic institutions and how, in turn, citizens' democratic norms are shaped.

Second and relatedly, we suggest that how democratic norms are shaped in a country should depend on its political culture, more precisely on political taboos and existing stigma towards specific political identities, which is of course related to historical roots and a country's experiences with

democracy. Part of the motivation for the study of democratic support was the experience with WWII, the downfall of fascist regimes and related concerns about how stable young democracies can be given their authoritarian past. Recent scholarship picks up this last point when emphasizing that citizens' attitudes and values are deeply dependent on their life experiences with specific regimes and their legacies: For instance Dinas and Northmore-Ball (2020) show that citizens in new democracies tend to have an anti-left (-right) bias if the former regimes was left (right) authoritarian. Similarly, we highlight that specifically countries that have had authoritarian experiences in the recent past are more likely to have established strong taboos against anti-democratic slant and positions – such as for instance Germany. This means that younger cohorts in such countries are less inclined to perceive these taboos and, as a result thereof, less likely to perceive democratic norms.

Besides these key, new theoretical insights, we will also study how previously discussed country-level characteristics – such as the number of political parties, political polarization and alternation in government – correlate with democratic norms. Of course, the two arguments developed above can be further extended and will give birth to further and more nuanced theoretical ideas about how country-level factors affect democratic norms in comparative perspective.

4 Evidence in observational studies

To motivate our study and to get a first understanding of whether or not democratic social norms exist, we screened existing surveys asking respondents about their democratic support along with variation in interview mode across respondents. Varying interview modes can be used to approximate the sanction mechanisms of social norms: private interview modes should make respondents less inclined to care about social desirability, while in face-to-face interview modes respondents should feel more pressured to share socially desirable opinions and values. We found but one study, the European Values Study (EVS) 2017, which randomly used interview modes in six of the surveyed countries. In these six countries, respondents are either interviewed face-to-face (CAPI, PAPI) or privately (CAWI, mail). Most importantly the sampling instructions and reports indicate that respondents could not choose the interview modes themselves, which means that this was quasi-randomly assigned to respondents.

Table 2 reports the number of respondents for each interview mode across the six countries we

study below. If democratic norms in the way we describe them above indeed do exist, we may assume

Table 2: Countries in EVS 2019 with two interview modes, *N* per interview mode

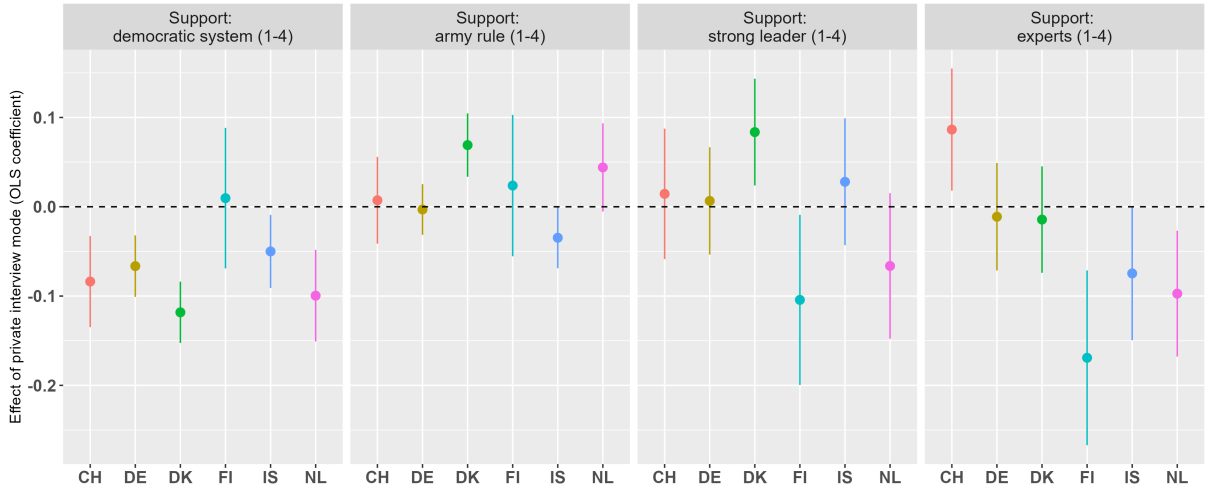
	Face−to−face	Private
Denmark	1696	1666
Finland	388	811
Germany	1494	3913
Iceland	915	1591
Netherlands	686	2035
Switzerland	673	2987

Note: Reported is the total number of respondents per interview mode (face-to-face (CAPI, PAPI) or privately (CAWI, mail)). The remaining countries included in the EVS only use a single interview mode.

that how respondents reply to questions about democratic support might vary across interview modes. Respondents who are interviewed in person are more likely to be affected by their perception of norms than persons who are interviewed privately. This is due to social desirability biases, which should be stronger in situations where third persons are present – such as being interviewed face-to-face – while they should be smaller if interviewed in private when respondents are on their own.

Figure 1 reports OLS regressions for the four key items asked in relation to democratic support.[4] The point estimates report the differences in responses for private versus personal interview mode.

Figure 1: How social norms drive support for democracy, EVS 2017



Note: Reported are OLS regressions with 95% confidence intervals. Each coefficient reports the effect of private (=1) versus face2face (=0) interview mode.

[4]The full question wordings are reported in the SI SI.1.

If social norms play a role, we hypothesize that support for democracy *declines* in the personal interview mode.

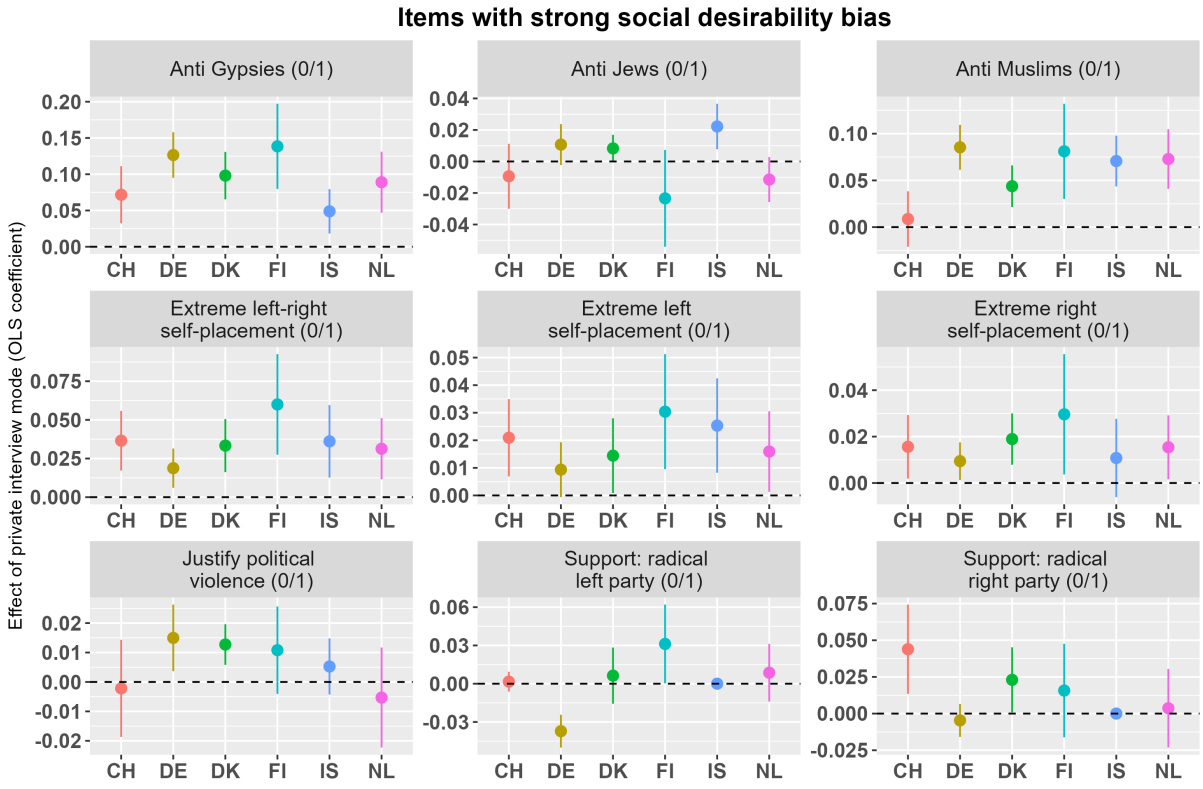
Strikingly, we do find that in five out of the six countries included in our analysis (left panel in Figure 1), *respondents are less inclined to support democracy as a political system if interviewed privately*. This is the case in Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Iceland, and the Netherlands. In terms of substantive effects, this means that respondents support democracy, on average, between 0.05 and 0.12 points less on the four-point Likert scale in the private interview mode, whereby the effect is particularly pronounced in Denmark. We also show that respondents are more likely to switch from the democracy-supporter to the democracy-opponent camp when being interviewed privately (Figure SI 1). This underlines the importance of social norms for democratic support, even though the effect vanishes among Swiss respondents when dichotomizing the democratic support variable. While we also find differences for the remaining political system questions in the EVS (remaining panels in Figure 1), the patterns are less clear across countries and in fact, all in all respondents do not share more authoritarian views if interviewed privately. Interesting is the Danish case, for which we find more support for having "the army" or "a strong leader rule'. Anecdotally, our first explanation for this is the long democratic tradition in Denmark, which might have made opposition to democracy a strong taboo.

The findings are robust to using population weights in the EVS as well as control variables. In the SI we also report sub-sample analyses across cohorts (Figure SI 2), gender (Figure SI 3) and self-reported extremes on a left-right scale (Figure SI 4). For all of these, we do not find meaningful differences, meaning that neither cohort, gender or ideological differences seem to be the explanation for the patterns we observe. In some countries, such as Denmark, we however find smaller effects of private interview modes among younger generations compared to older generations. Following our theoretical argument that would mean that respondents perceive less of a social norm in favor of democracy the younger they are.

Finally, we further extend our analyses across other questions included in the EVS. More specifically, we seek to find items for which we are certain that strong social norms exist. A clear candidate for strong norms are minority interests, such as for instance "which of the following groups would

you not like to have as your neighbors"?[5] Here the actual question wording itself uses a racial slur for the Roma. Thus, we have strong reason to assume that in combination with the private interview mode, social desirability pressures should weaken tremendously. We report the findings for these analyses in Figure 2. Turning to the Roma in the left top panel of Figure 2 we find a difference of

Figure 2: For which items in the EVS do we find the strongest social desirability biases?



Note: Reported are OLS regressions with 95% confidence interval. Each coefficient reports the effect of private (=1) versus face2face (=0) interview mode.

up to 15 percentage points increase in anti-Roma sentiment when respondents are interviewed in the private versus the face-to-face interview mode. In turn, we do find much smaller effects for the remaining questions we analyze here, also for "Jews" and "Muslims" as unwanted neighbors.

5 Experimental design

We are currently designing our experimental approach. In many ways it follows a similar idea to the observational approach above: on the one hand, we seek to develop primes that make it more likely

[5] We notice that gypsy is an offensive wording used as a racial slur for the Roma population in various countries. It is, however, the actual question-wording in the EVS which is why we here use the term but then go on to use "Roma".

for respondents to perceive social desirability biases. On the other, and more crucially, it allows us to measure social norms in relation to democracy: we develop a battery of questions that measure both descriptive and injunctive norms in relation to democratic support.

More specifically, we will run surveys in up to 15 countries with up to 4,000 respondents per country starting in June 2023.[6] Besides typical questions on respondents' socio-economic background we will then also ask a set of batteries on democratic support as well as on respondents' perception of social norms in relation to supporting democracy. In SI SI.4 we provide a full list of the questions we seek to 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"*

Given that we have data on citizens' own evaluation of democracy, we can then calculate whether or not respondents misperceive democratic support in their country.[7] As this is an explorative effort, we currently do not have priors about who misperceive support and in which countries misperception is larger.

Priming social desirability

From the start of the survey respondents are either randomly treated with a prime increasing their feeling to reveal preferences that match existing social norms or they are not primed at all.

[6] Austria, Brazil, Denmark, Germany, France, Hungary, India, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Spain, South Africa, [Switzerland], 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).

[7] misperception = perceived support - actual support.

We are currently designing a pre-test in which we use five different treatments to increase respondents' feelings to share socially desirable opinions:

1. a list experiment
2. Intro text treatment (confidentiality): *"The results from this survey, including your individual opinions, will be posted on our website in the future as scientific reports. If you share your personal email address with us, we will be happy to notify you when the results become available on our website."* (For a similar approach, see: Bursztyn, Egorov, and Fiorin 2020)
3. Live chat treatment: At the beginning of the survey a live chat will pop up. Respondents will see a message stating that: *"One of our research assistant is live with you while you respond to our survey. If any questions emerge please do not hesitate to get in touch with us."*
4. Camera treatment: Respondents will be asked if they have a working web camera as we might need them to use it to answer one of the questions in the survey.
5. Pairing responses: *"After you have finished we might show your responses to other respondents and you will also see responses from other respondents."*

We will use the pre-test to test how well these treatments work by asking respondents at the end of the survey how much they are concerned about the confidentiality of their responses as a manipulation check.

6 State of the project

We are currently revising this conceptual paper along with our empirical design. Any comments and suggestions on theory, survey, and experimental design are much appreciated. The current draft is intended to make our theoretical framework available to the research community and showcase the following steps of our project. We will update this draft as the data come in.

Project schedule:

- June 2023: pre-test on 4,000 respondents in the USA (testing all social desirability primes)
- July 2023: fieldwork in up to five countries
- August/September 2023: staggered fieldwork in remaining ten countries.

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Supporting Information:

(Mis-)Perceiving Support for Democracy: The Role of Social Norms for Democracies

SI Supporting Information

Contents

SI.1 EVS question wordings

Respondents were asked about their support for political systems using a battery of four questions:

"In the following questions, various types of political systems will be described. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country? Is this a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?"

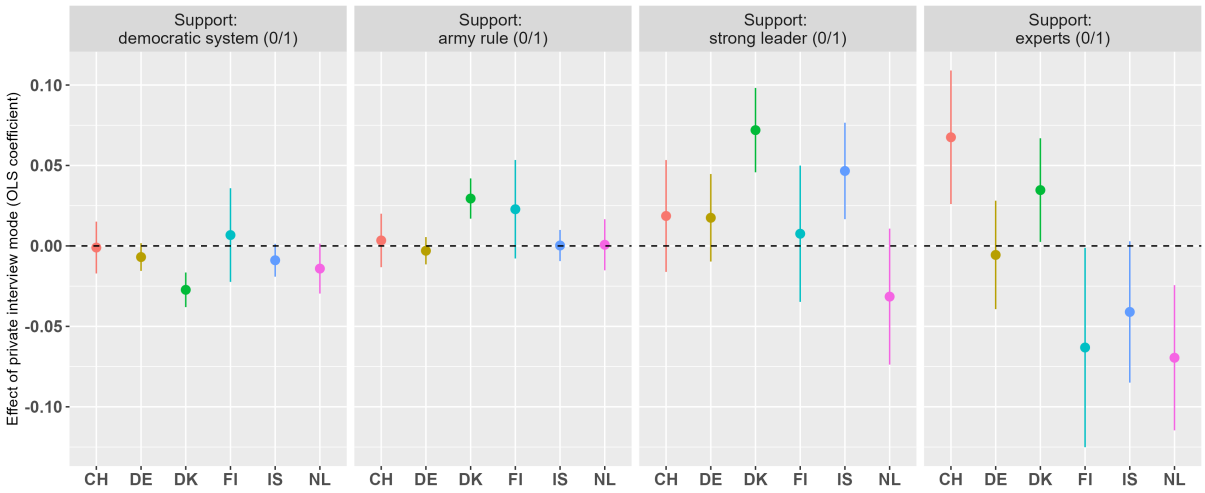
- Having a democratic political system
- Having the army rule the country
- Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country
- Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections

Response categories:

1. very good
2. fairly good
3. fairly bad
4. very bad

SI.2 Binary outcome: Democratic supporters vs. opponents

Figure SI 1: Are respondents more likely to reveal opposition to democracy in private interview mode? Yes, but it depends on context.

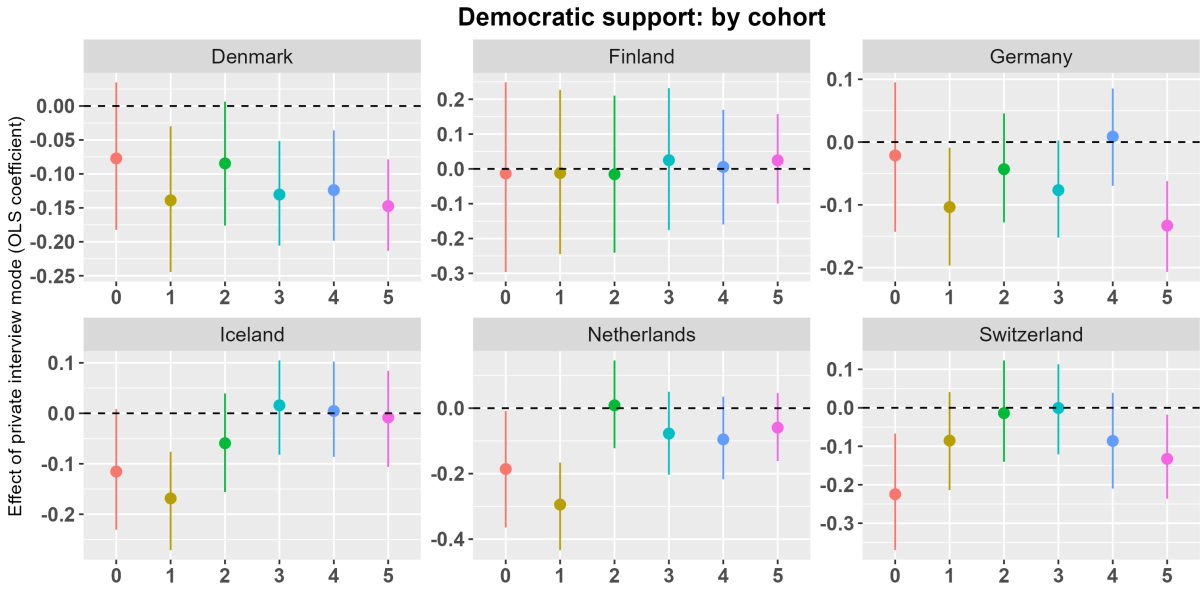


Note: Reported are OLS regressions with 95% confidence interval. Each coefficient reports the effect of private (=1) versus face2face (=0) interview mode.

SI.3 Subsample analysis: EVS 2017

SI.3.1 Cohort effects

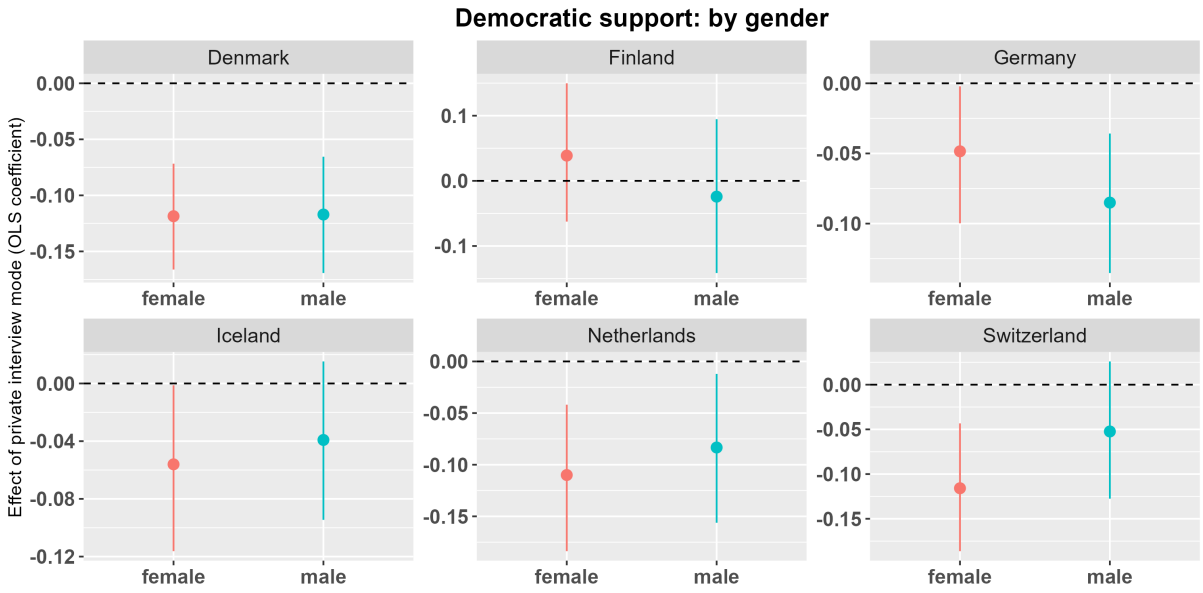
Figure SI 2: Does the effect of private interview mode vary across cohorts? Depends.



Note: Reported are OLS regressions with 95% confidence interval. Each coefficient reports the effect of private (=1) versus face2face (=0) interview mode interacted with cohorts. Cohorts are coded as ...

SI.3.2 Gender gap

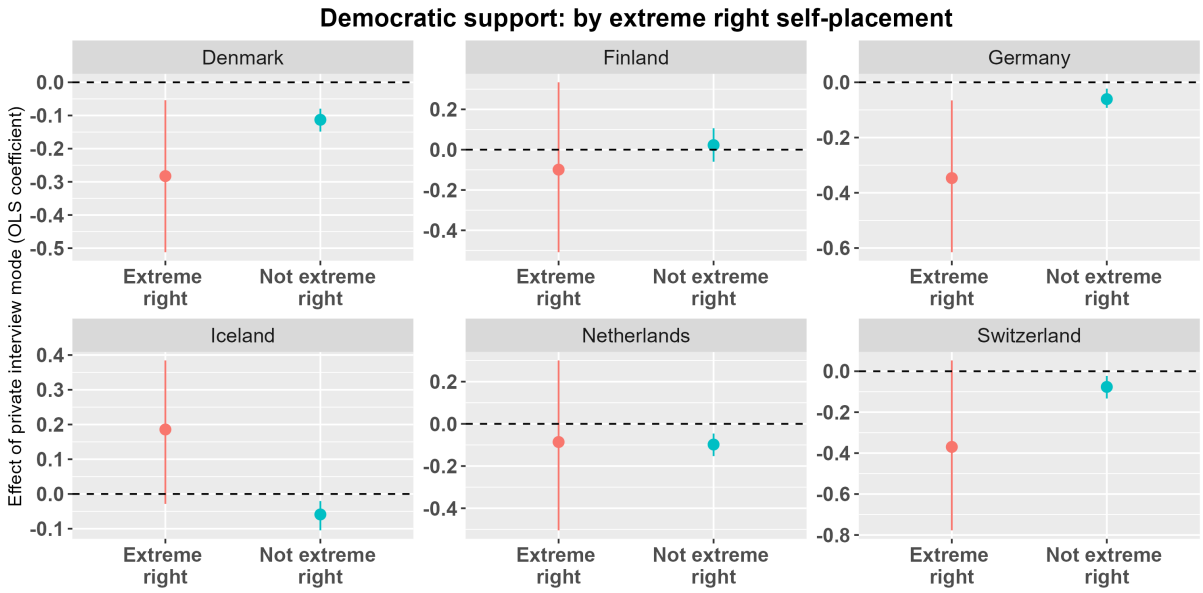
Figure SI 3: Is there a gender gap in the effect of private interview mode? No.



Note: Reported are OLS regressions with 95% confidence interval. Each coefficient reports the effect of private (=1) versus face2face (=0) interview mode interacted with gender.

SI.3.3 Radical right

Figure SI 4: Do self-reported radical right supports show stronger social desirability biases? No.



Note: Reported are OLS regressions with 95% confidence interval. Each coefficient reports the effect of private (=1) versus face2face (=0) interview mode interacted with self-reported radical right support (=...).

SI.3.4 For which items in the EVS is the social desirability bias the strongest?

SI.4 Our survey questions

SI.4.1 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. Giving up on a little bit of democracy would make this country better able to get through crises

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

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

SI.4.2 Questions on social norms in relation to democratic support:

Descriptive social norms:

Please indicate in percent how many people in this country you think would agree with each of the following statements.

Scale: Slider 0-100 percent

Injunctive social norms:

Please indicate in percent how many people in this country you think would say that YOU ought to agree with 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.4.3 Questions on social norms in relation to reference networks

Do you think the following people would agree with your answers to the previous questions (own democratic attitudes)? Please indicate if each of the following groups would agree with you:

- your family members
- your neighbors
- your co-workers (if applicable)
- supporters of your preferred party (if applicable)