

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

Job Talk:

*“Professorship with a focus on Democratic Political Decision-Making”*

University of Hamburg

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## *The road ahead:*

### (Mis-)perceiving support for Democracy – Social Norms and Democratic Support

1. Who am I? My research agenda
2. Theory: how social norms drive individual preferences
3. Argument: social norms as a consensus for democracy
4. Design: large scale surveys across 14 democracies to a) measure social norms b) manipulate norm perception
5. Findings: Social norms on democracy are weak
6. Ongoing and future research agenda

# Who I am: my research agenda

## Comparative Politics & Behavior:

- ▶ public opinion formation  
*(e.g. how the yellow press drives Eurosceptic attitudes)*
- ▶ extremist attitudes ↔ far right parties  
*(e.g. how social media can be used to mobilize party activists)*
- ▶ social norms  
*(e.g. how parliamentary entry of populist parties shifts social norms)*

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## Geography & Methods:

- ▶ Democracies around the globe
- ▶ Quantitative social scientist
- ▶ Using **cutting-edge methods** for data collection combined with careful research designs allowing **causal conclusions**

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Social Norms:

*“a shared standard of acceptable behavior by a group”*

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Norms are social conventions; they guide human behavior (Bicchieri 2016).

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*they approximate what others 'believe'*
- ▶ Individuals are social entities, they have 'reason' to fit in  
*mechanism: fear of social sanctioning*
- ▶ **Conditionality:** Individuals will adapt their public statements in order to conform with perceived social norms  
(Bischof and Wagner 2019; Bursztyn, Egorov, and Fiorin 2020; Valentim 2021)
  - Thereby they are influenced by a behavioral (*descriptive*) and normative component (*injunctive*)

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

w. *DEMNORM project team:*

*Tim Lars Allinger, Morgan Le Corre  
Juratic & Kristian Frederiksen*

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## *Motivation: challenges against democracy ...*



## *Literature: what we know about democratic attitudes*

- ▶ Origins: almost exclusively focuses on individual attitudes toward democracy
- ▶ But already assumes a **social consensus for democracy** not conceptualized more carefully  
(Lipset 1959; Easton 1965; Almond and Verba 1965)
- ▶ Congruence between public attitudes on democracy and institutions  
(Almond and Verba 1965: Chapter 1)
- ▶ Almost all empirical research attests large scale support for democracy within populations across time and space  
(Claassen 2020; Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2022; Voeten 2017; Inglehart 2003)

↳ But yet we still observe challenges to democracy ...

Conceptualizing the “*social consensus*” as a social norm for  
democracy

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Measuring social norms in relation to democracy across 14 countries

Conceptualizing the “*social consensus*” as a social norm for democracy

Measuring social norms in relation to democracy across 14 countries

Disclosing how social norms conditions support for democracy

## Theoretical implications: based on prior work

- ▶ Conditionality hypothesis: individuals will condition their support for democracy to match perceived social norms



## *Theoretical implications:* based on prior work

- ▶ Conditionality hypothesis: individuals will condition their support for democracy to match perceived social norms
  - “*Democratic de-consolidation*”: younger cohorts perceive weaker social norms (Foa and Mounk 2016; Frederiksen 2024)
  - “*Radical right bubble*”: supporters of the racial right perceive weaker social norms

## Research Design

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## Research Design:

1. **Own pre-registered survey:** measuring social norms across 14 countries  
representative survey design
2. **Own pre-registered experiments:** vignette survey experiments across 14 countries  
fictitious scenarios with random variation of social norms | 2x2 factorial design
3. **Existing surveys:** random assignment of interview mode, e.g. EVS 2017  
private: less social desirability pressures | “face2face”: more social desirability pressures

## Own survey: design

- ▶ 42,000 respondents, 3,000 per country (*with Cint*)
- ▶ Austria, Brazil, Denmark, Germany, India, France, Hungary, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Spain, South Africa, United Kingdom, United States  
*(representing about 31% of the world population)*
- ▶ Individual attitudes in relation to democracy
- ▶ Social norms – descriptive & injunctive – in relation to democracy:

*We are asking 'this' to another 100 random citizens. Out of 100, how many do you think will support ...*

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➡ no projection

# Own survey: items used for measurement

*Italics=existing items; bold=designed by us*

## 1. Dahl (1956), power-sharing:

- *Support for democracy*
- *Churchill*
- *Strong leader*
- *Army rule*

## 2. Przeworski (2019), minimal definition:

- Accept election losses

## 3. Liberal democracy:

- Freedom of speech should have limits to protect minorities
- Majoritarian views
- Hostility towards minorities justified
- Storming political institutions

# Own survey: items used for measurement

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## 1. Dahl (1956), power-sharing:

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➡‘Having a democratic political system is a good way of governing this country’
- Churchill
- Strong leader
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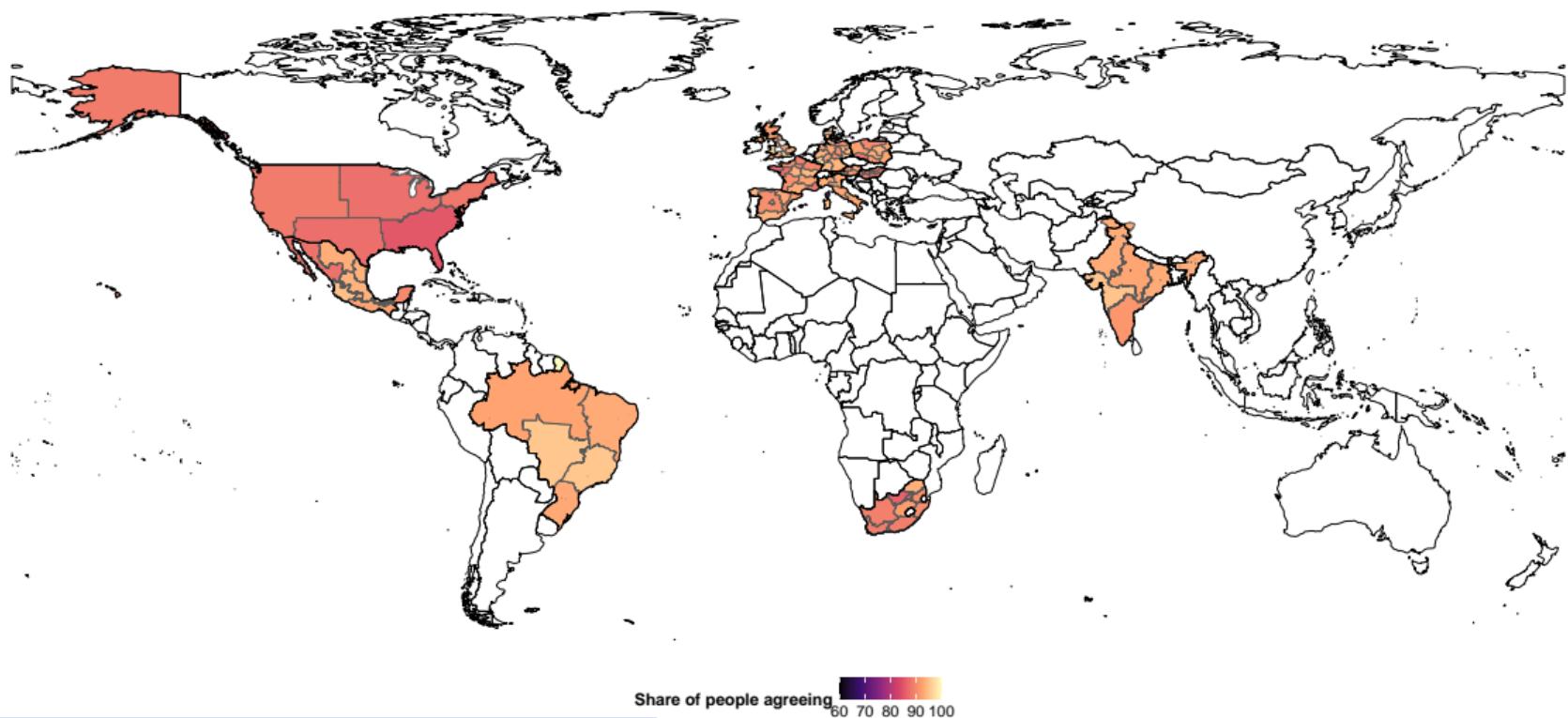
➡‘Sometimes it is necessary to use violent means such as storming political institutions’

## *Findings: descriptive*

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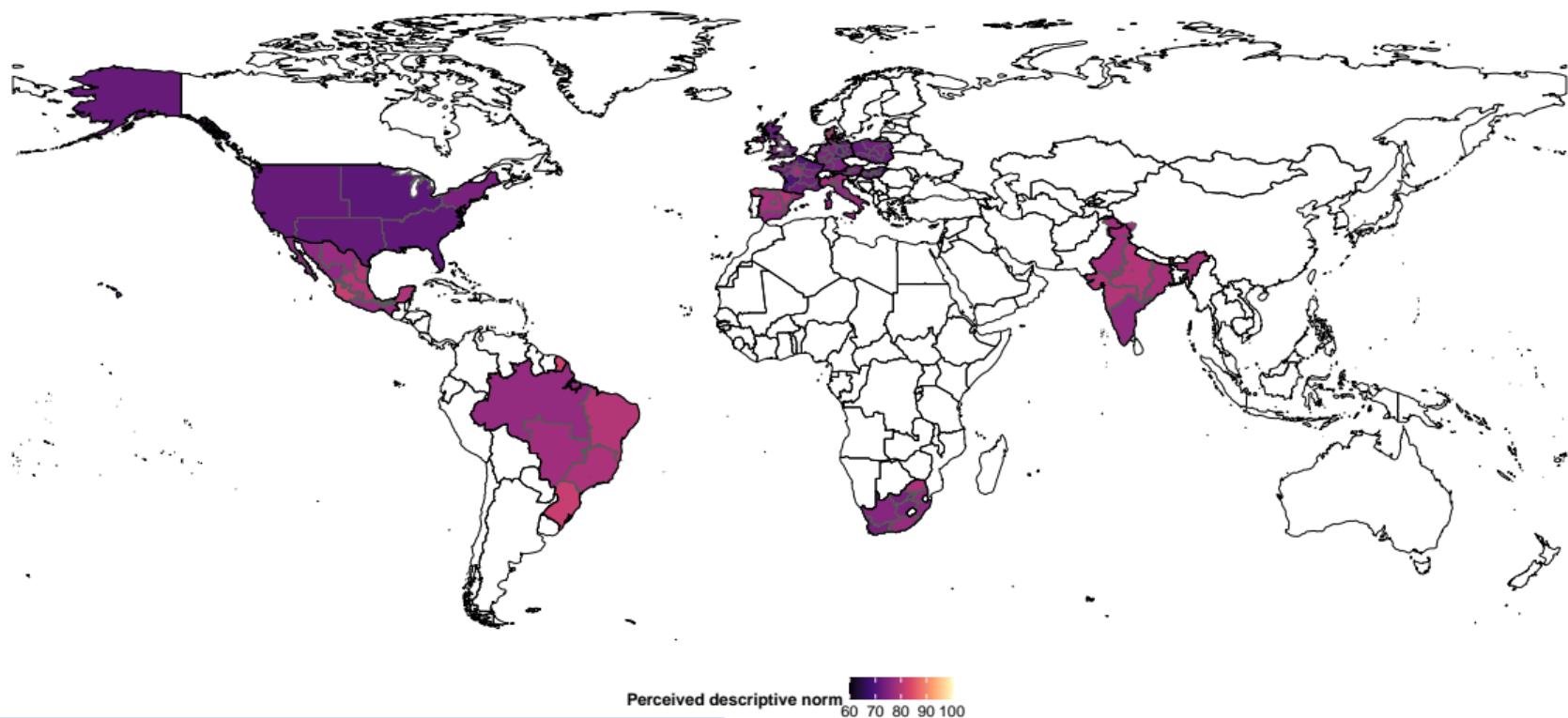
# Map: supporting democracy

**Agreement:**  
Having a democratic political system is  
a good way of governing this country

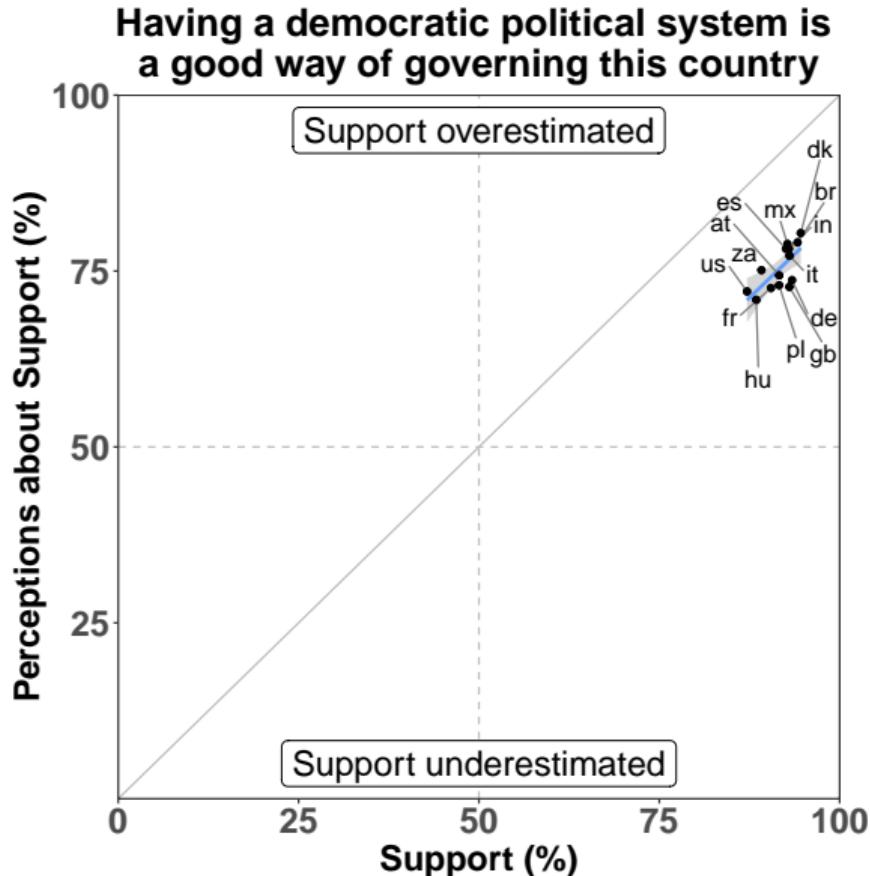


# Map: perceiving other support

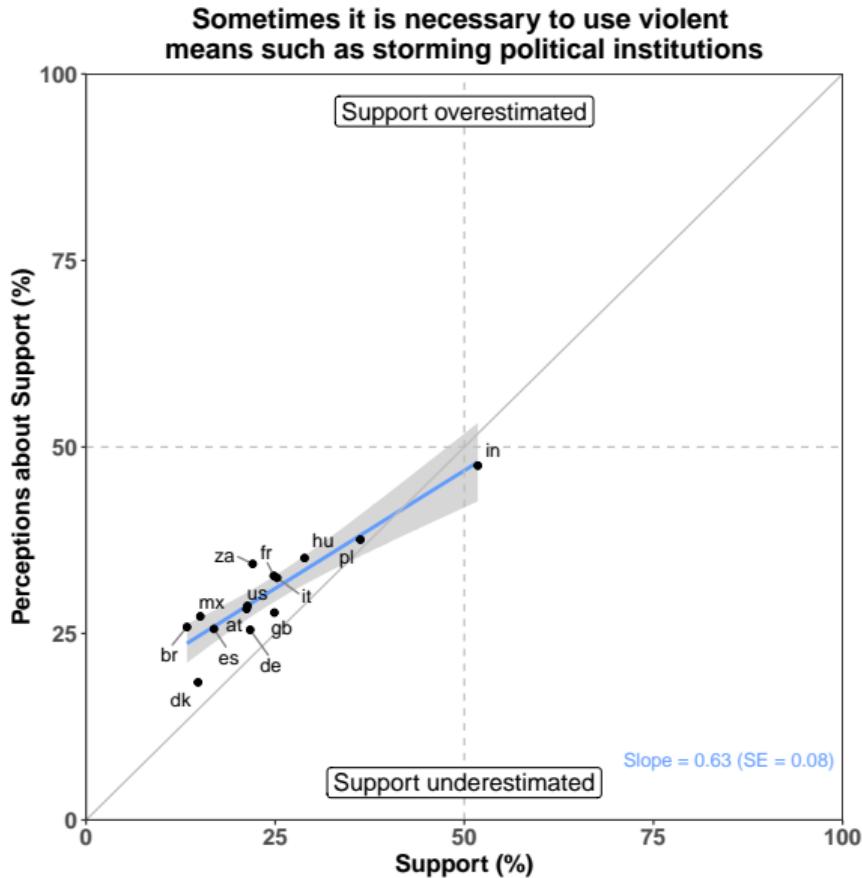
**Perceived descriptive norm:**  
Having a democratic political system is  
a good way of governing this country



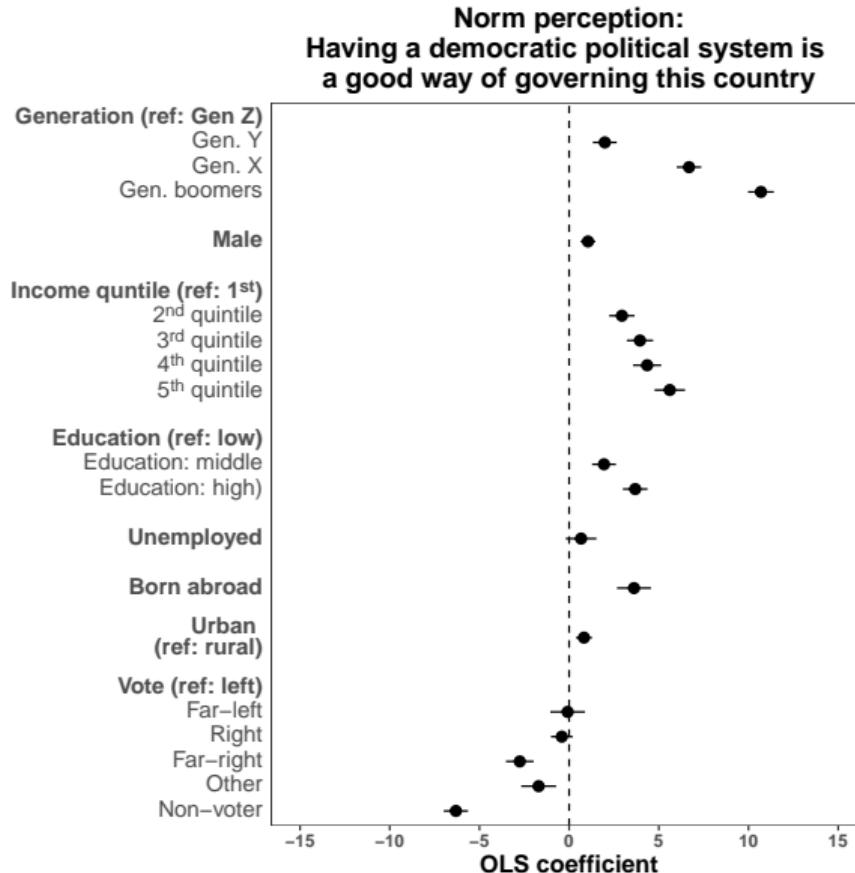
## Findings: correlation



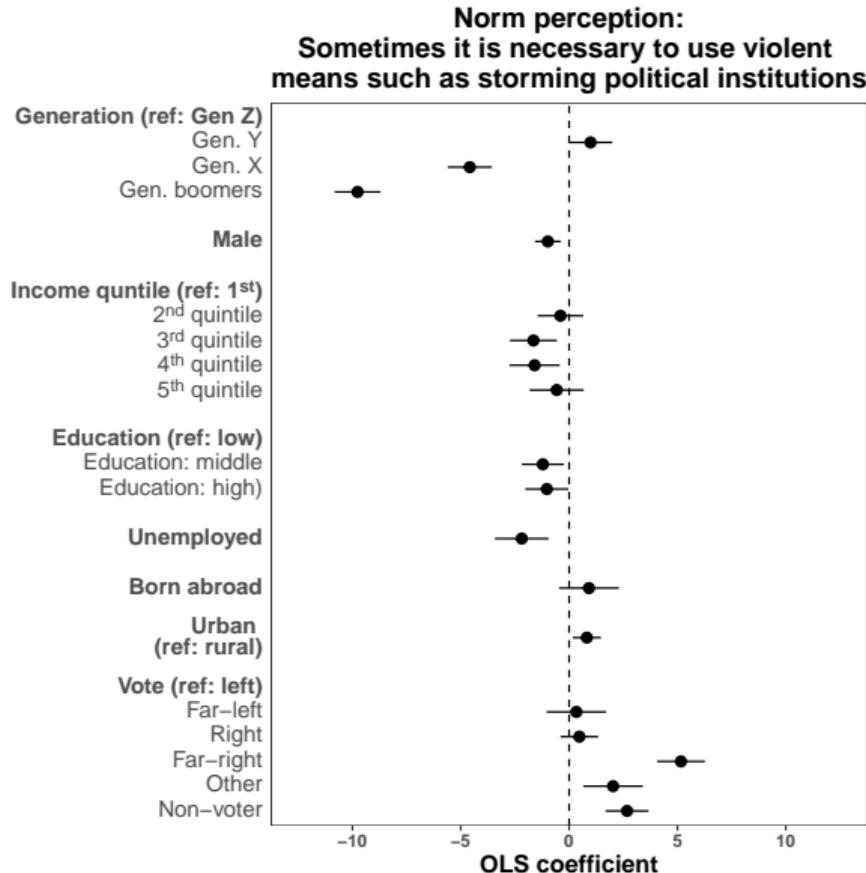
## Findings: storming institutions



# Findings: Correlates of 'democracy good'



# Findings: Correlates of 'storming institutions'



## *Research Design:*

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## Vignette: Randomized manipulation

Somebody just like you lives in a very similar country 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 to be this person. Given the information above, would you support this country being a democratic system?

## *Own survey: vignette*

		descriptive social norm
	<i>low/low</i>	<i>low/high</i>
injunctive	<i>high/low</i>	<i>high/high</i>

## Own survey: vignette

		descriptive social norm
injunctive	<i>low/low</i>	<i>low/high</i>
	<i>high/low</i>	<i>high/high</i>

- Allows us to detect **conditionality** of shared support for democracy

## Own survey: vignette

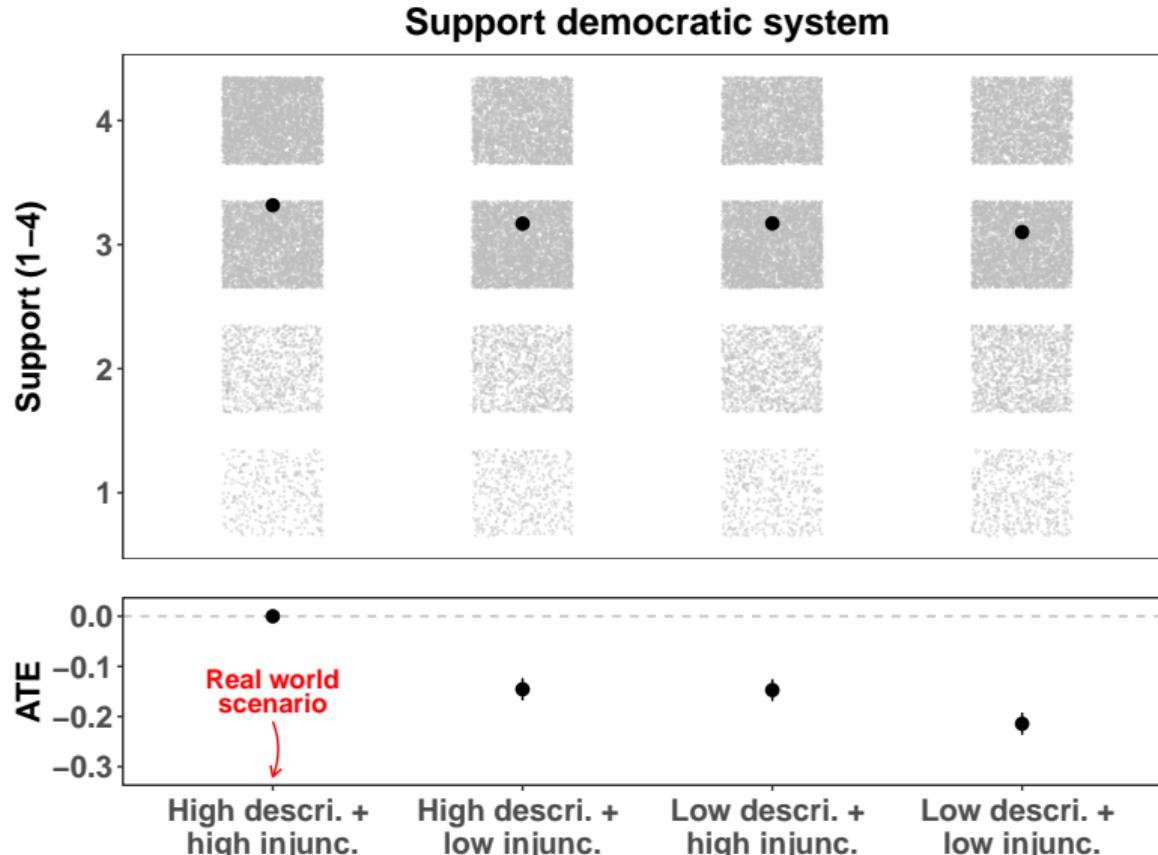
		descriptive social norm
	<i>low/low</i>	<i>low/high</i>
injunctive	<i>high/low</i>	<i>high/high</i>

- Allows us to detect **conditionality** of shared support for democracy
- strong manipulation effects

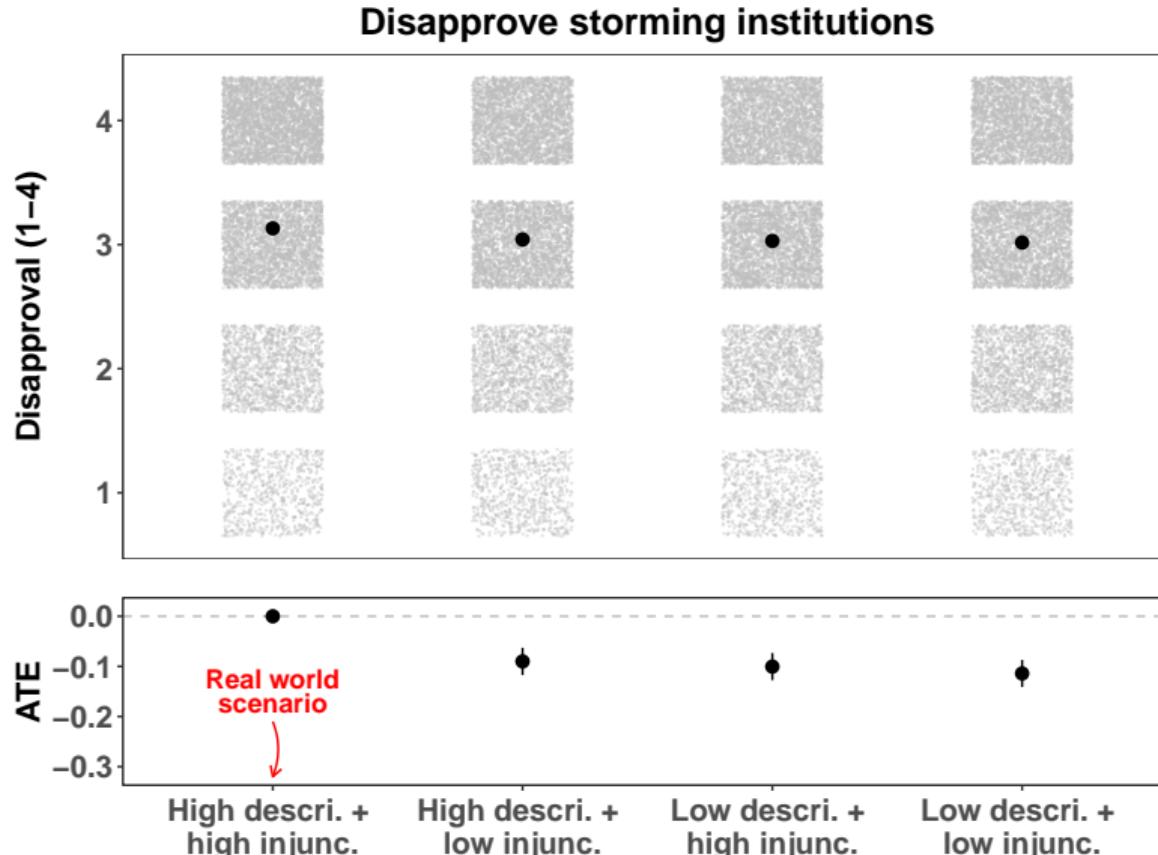
## *Findings: conditionality*

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## Vignette: support democracy



## Vignette: storming institutions



## *Conclusions & Implications*

- ▶ Key implication: citizens democratic preferences are guided towards ‘others’ → ‘others’ have an underappreciated effect on our democracies
- ▶ This is the case for all countries we study; though huge differences in ‘levels’ exist

## *Conclusions & Implications*

- ▶ **Key implication:** citizens democratic preferences are guided towards ‘others’ → ‘others’ have an underappreciated effect on our democracies
- ▶ This is the case for all countries we study; though huge differences in ‘levels’ exist
- ▶ **Implication for decision-making:** elites can shape citizens’ perceptions in their favor

The screenshot shows a podcast episode page from 'The Daily'. At the top left is the 'The Daily' logo, which is a small blue square with a white 'D' and the word 'The Daily' in white. To the right of the logo is the title 'The Daily' in a large, bold, white sans-serif font. On the far right, there are two links: 'Subscribe: Apple Podcasts' and 'Google Podcasts', both in white text. Below the title, there is a large, dark blue rectangular area that serves as the main content area. In the center of this area, the date 'Jan. 5, 2022' is displayed in a small, white, sans-serif font. Below the date, the episode title 'Jan. 6, Part 1: “The Herd Mentality”' is prominently displayed in a large, white, sans-serif font. Underneath the title, a subtitle reads 'Inside an F.B.I. interview with one of the Capitol rioters.' in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the main content area, there is a button with a white 'Transcript' label and a small icon of a document with horizontal lines.

## *Conclusions & Implications*

- ▶ **Key implication:** citizens democratic preferences are guided towards ‘others’ → ‘others’ have an underappreciated effect on our democracies
- ▶ This is the case for all countries we study; though huge differences in ‘levels’ exist
- ▶ **Implication for decision-making:** elites can shape citizens’ perceptions in their favor
- ➔ Currently: **using social norms as an intervention to safeguard democracy**  
Applying Llama 3 AI-classifiers on open-ended text, more: [ongoing intervention study](#)

## Ongoing & Future Research

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## *Research area I: Social norms and moral memes*

- ▶ Ongoing research project with 2 postdocs and a PhD student
- ▶ *Funding: Carlsberg & AUFF 1 Million €, 2 postdocs, 1 PhD student*
- ▶ ERC Consolidator (01/2026): moral memes and political representation
- ➔ University of Hamburg (Climate, Earth and Environment + CLICCS B1 + B2):
  - Climate change as political conflict: perceptions of activists by others
  - Climate policy and positions are the key topic for ERC Consolidator proposal

## *Research area II: forestalling anti-democratic challenges*

- ▶ Which policy instruments can be used to curtail anti-democratic tendencies?
- ▶ E.g. employment bans (“Radikalenerlass”), direct democracy, local investments funds
- ▶ Together with 2 postdocs in Münster
- ▶ DFG Paketantrag (02/2025): how to trigger militant democrats?
- ➡ University of Hamburg (Grounds, Norms, Decisions): causality + decision-making

## *Research area III: Perception and political violence*

- ▶ What role do local norm perceptions play for hate crimes?
- ▶ E.g. Man-hunt in Chemnitz
- ▶ DFG Sachbeihilfe: (mis-)perceiving my neighbor as a xenophobe: local norms and hate
  - ➡ University of Hamburg: profile initiative ‘violence and security research’

Thank you very much!

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## Appendix

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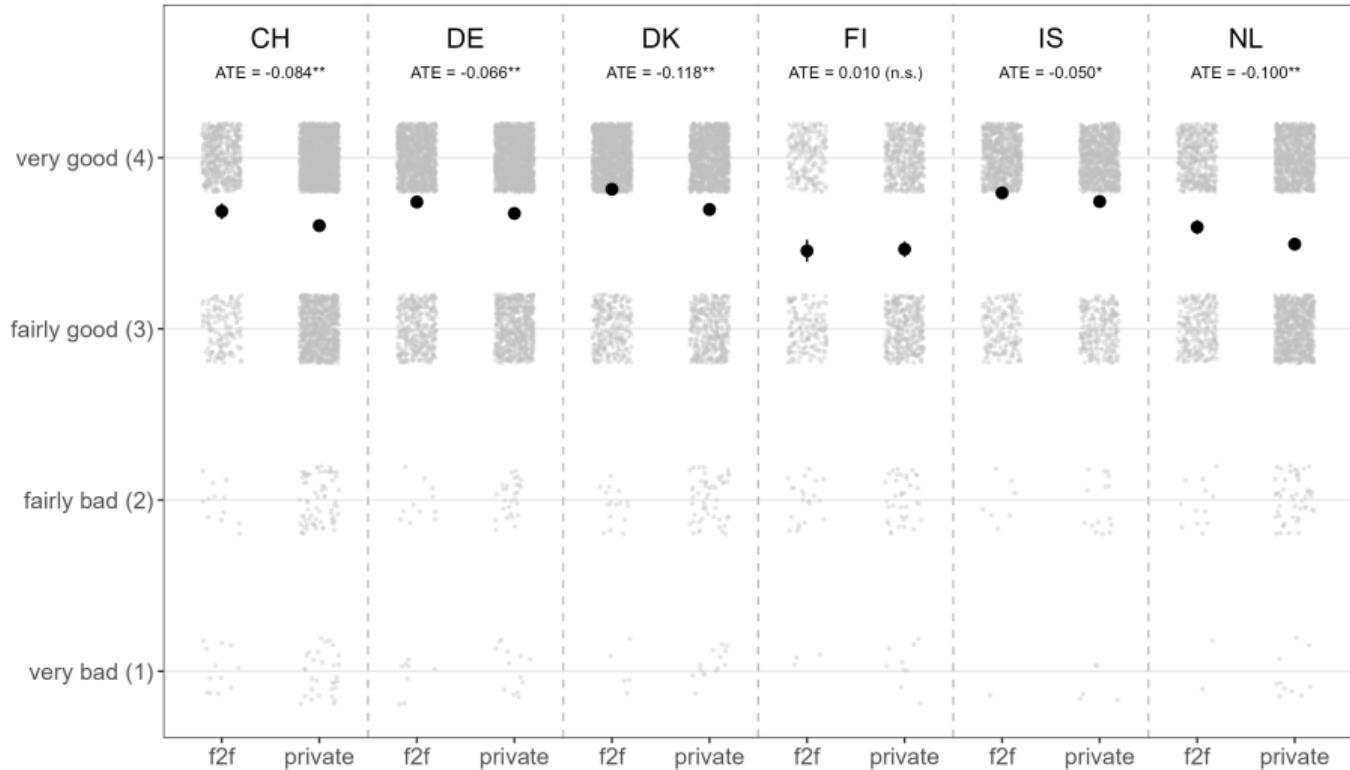
## Appendix: table of contents

1. EVS 2017 findings
2. Wording of items
3. Case selection
4. Why this design instead of global treatment?
5. Robustness: projection
6. Robustness: manipulation
7. Robustness: findings remaining items
8. Study 2: intervention

# EVS 2017: key findings

back

## Having a democratic political system



## Democratic Support Items:

[back](#)

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. The will of the majority should always prevail, even over the rights of minorities.
9. Hostility against \*minorities\* is sometimes justified, even if it ends up in violence
10. This country would be better able to [Performance Condition] if the government [(Un)democratic Behaviour]

## Case selection:

back

### Democracies ...

1. with various experience in length (e.g Hungary, Poland vs. US, UK)
  2. variation in democratic theory and institutions (majoritarian vs. more egalitarian)
  3. some faced major attacks on institutions lately (e.g. US, Brazil, Hungary, Poland, Mexico) others not
- ➔ approximates most dissimilar design (*cases very different, results not*)

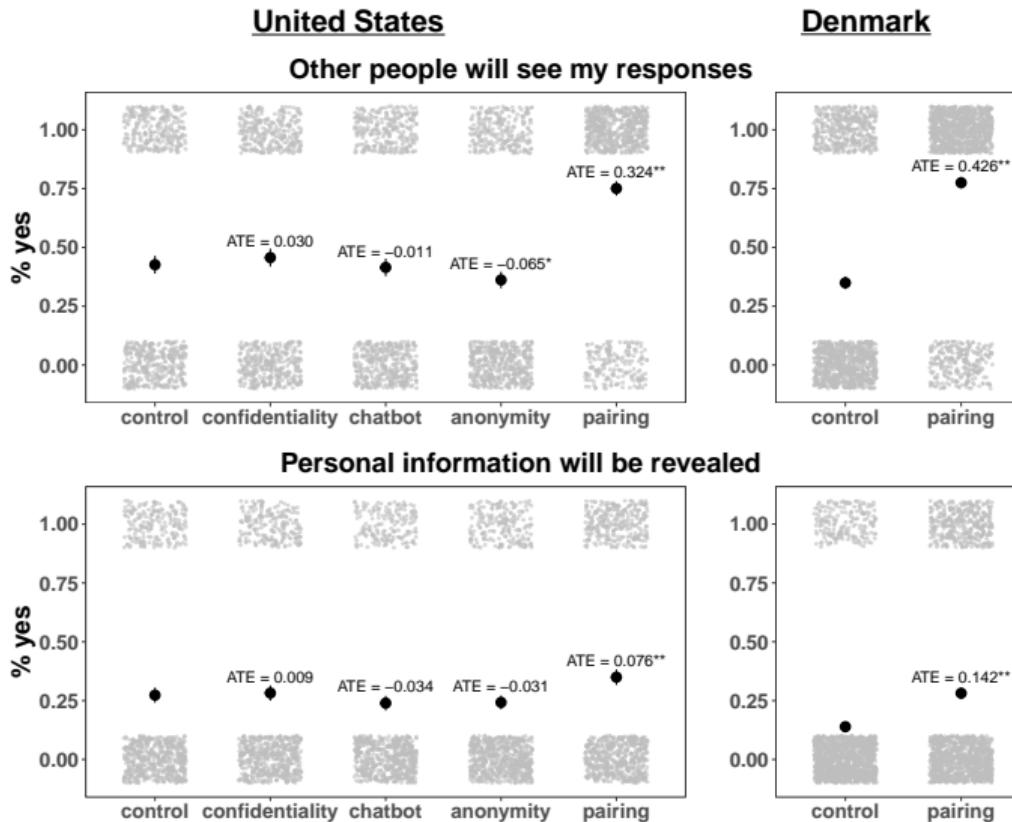
## *Design of vignette: why not global treatment?*

[back](#)

- ▶ Extensive pre-test study (pre-registered)
- ▶ We replicated previous treatments (e.g. *lack of 'confidentiality'*) along with own designs ('pairing')
- ▶ We cannot replicate previous findings on three different samples (*US, DK, DK student sample*)
- ▶ Much too risky approach: almost no manipulation!

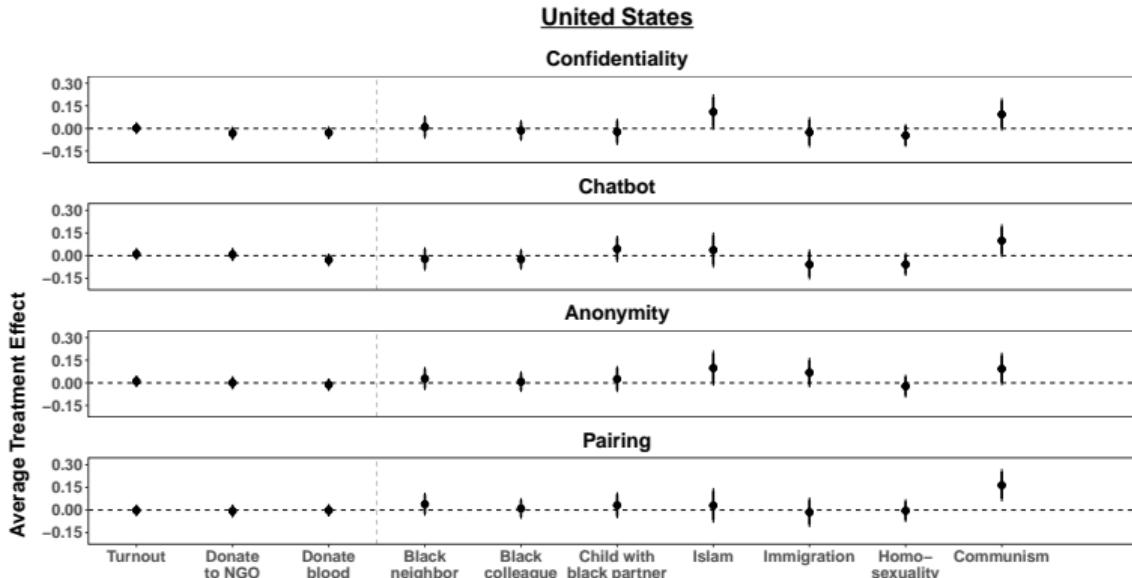
# Design of vignette: manipulation

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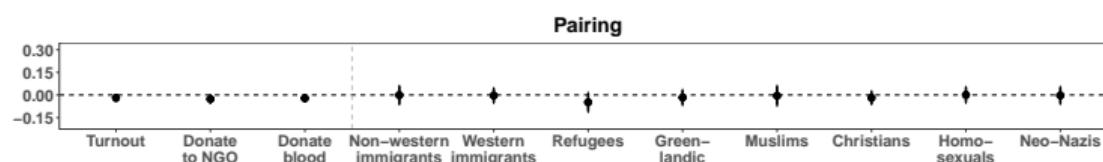


# Design of vignette: results

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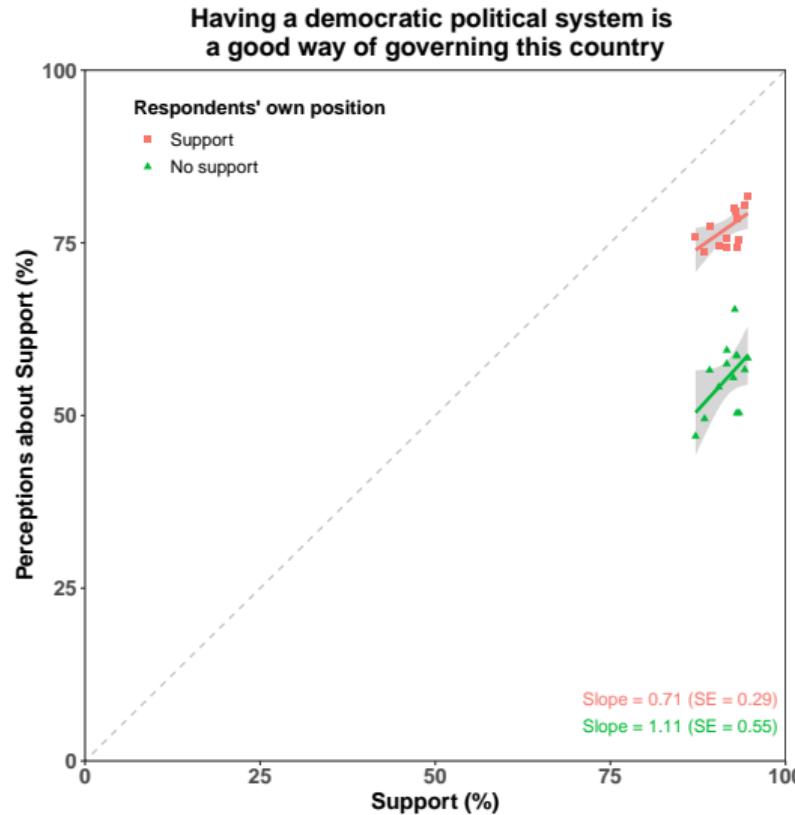


## Denmark



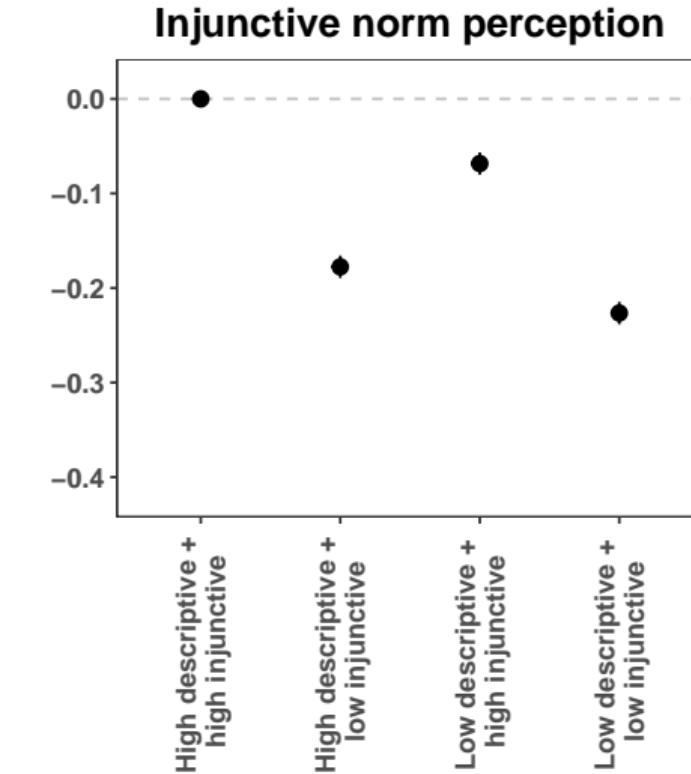
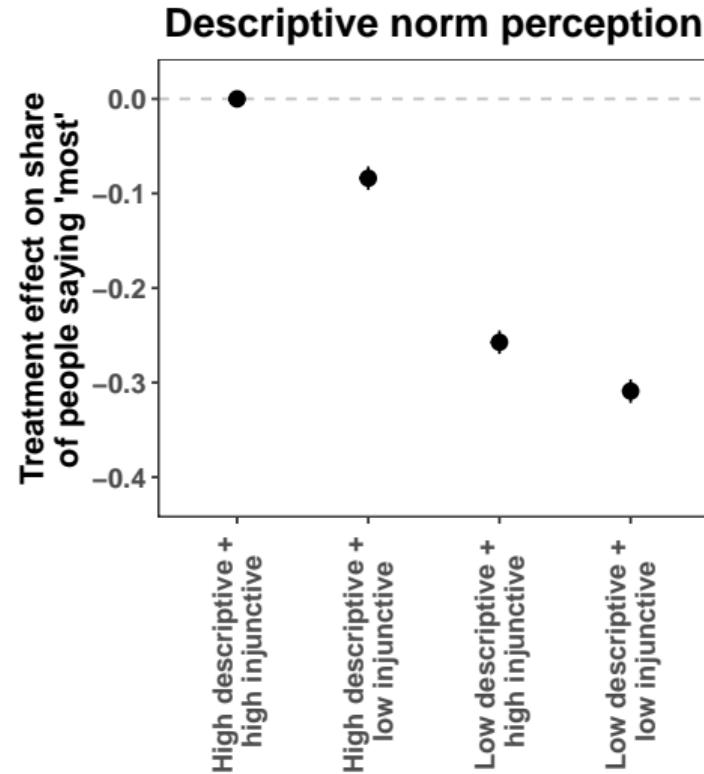
# Projection: but wait, isn't this all projection?

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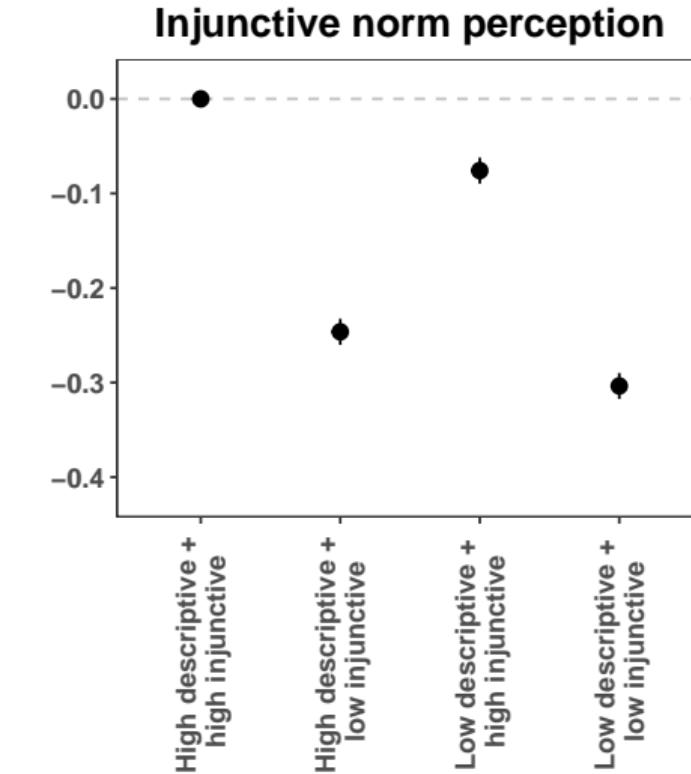
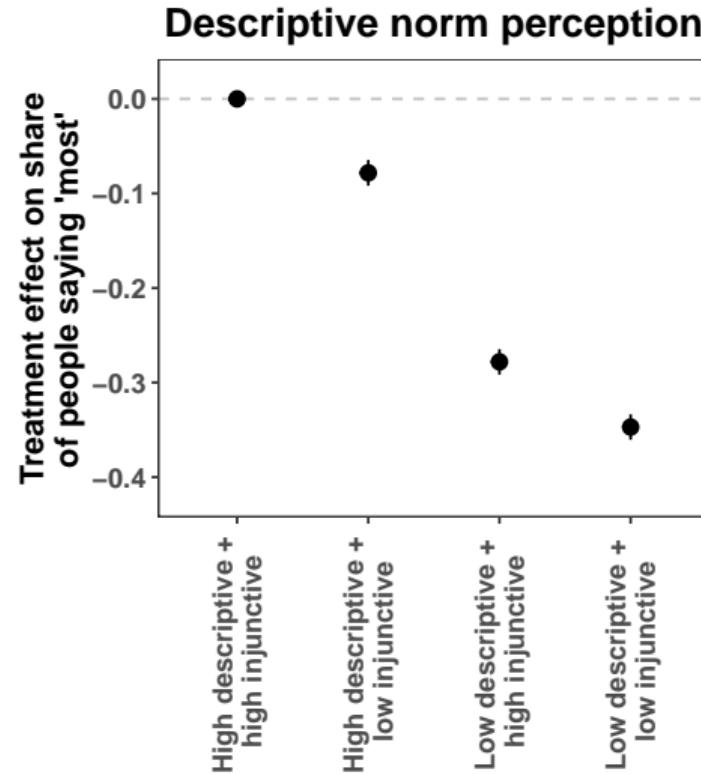
# Vignette: Manipulation demo

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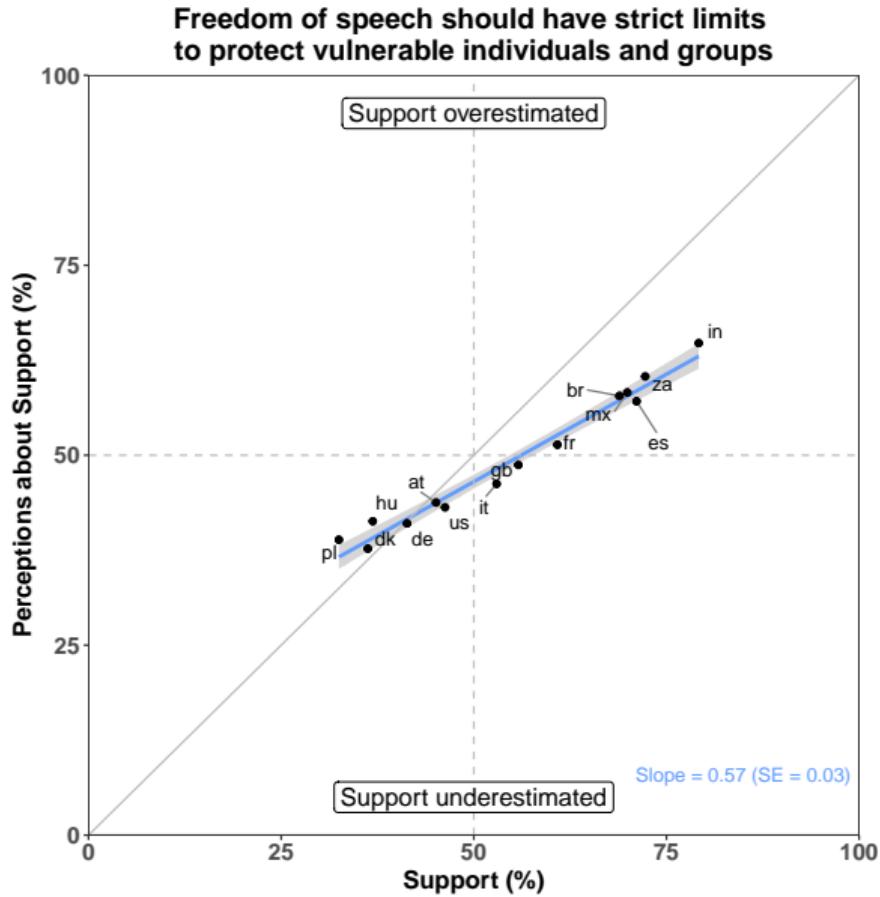


# Vignette: Manipulation storming

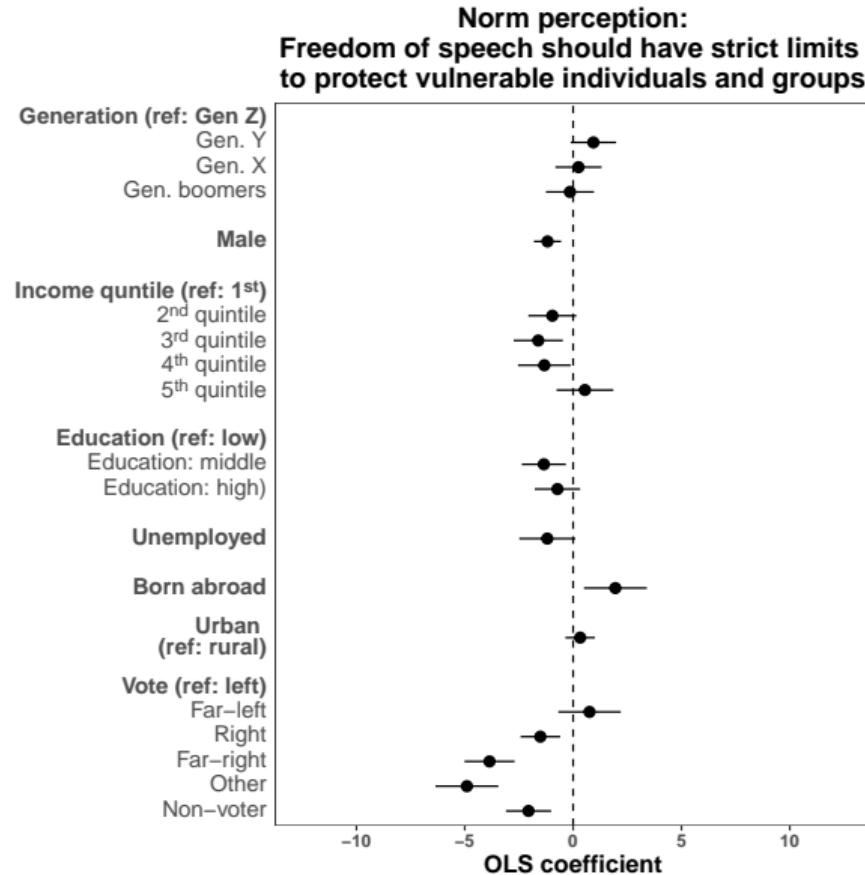
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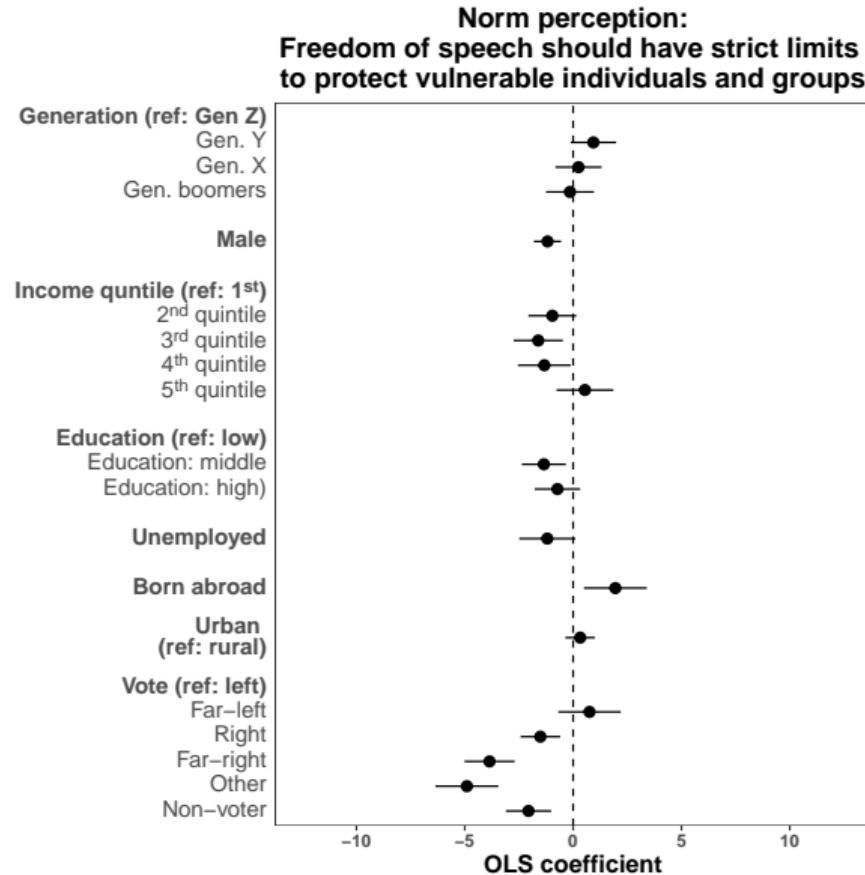
## Findings: scatterplot, freedom of speech



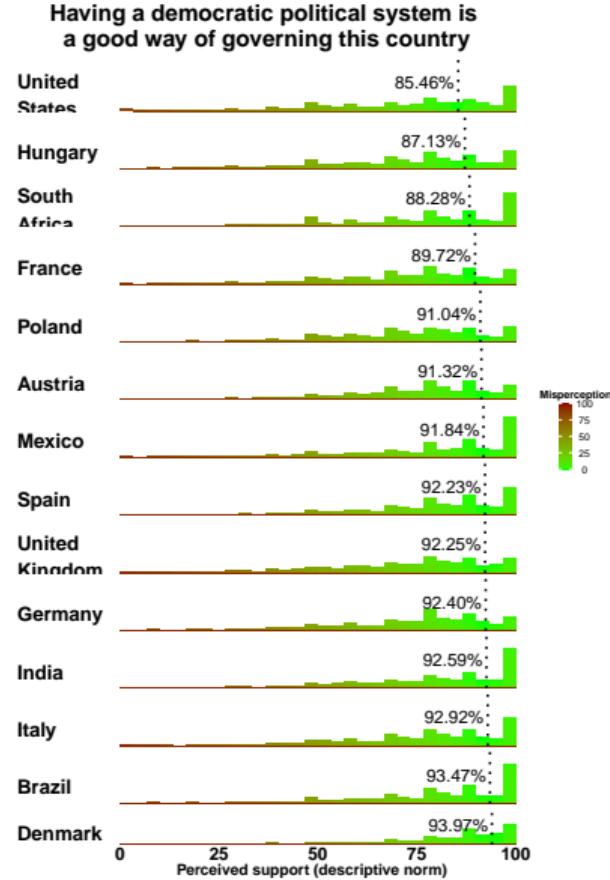
# Findings: correlates, freedom of speech



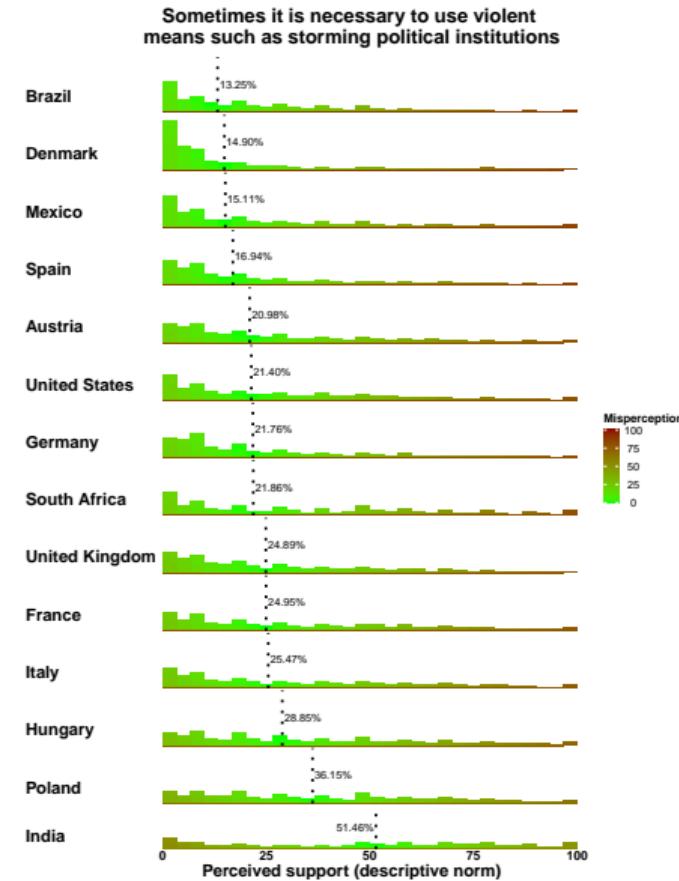
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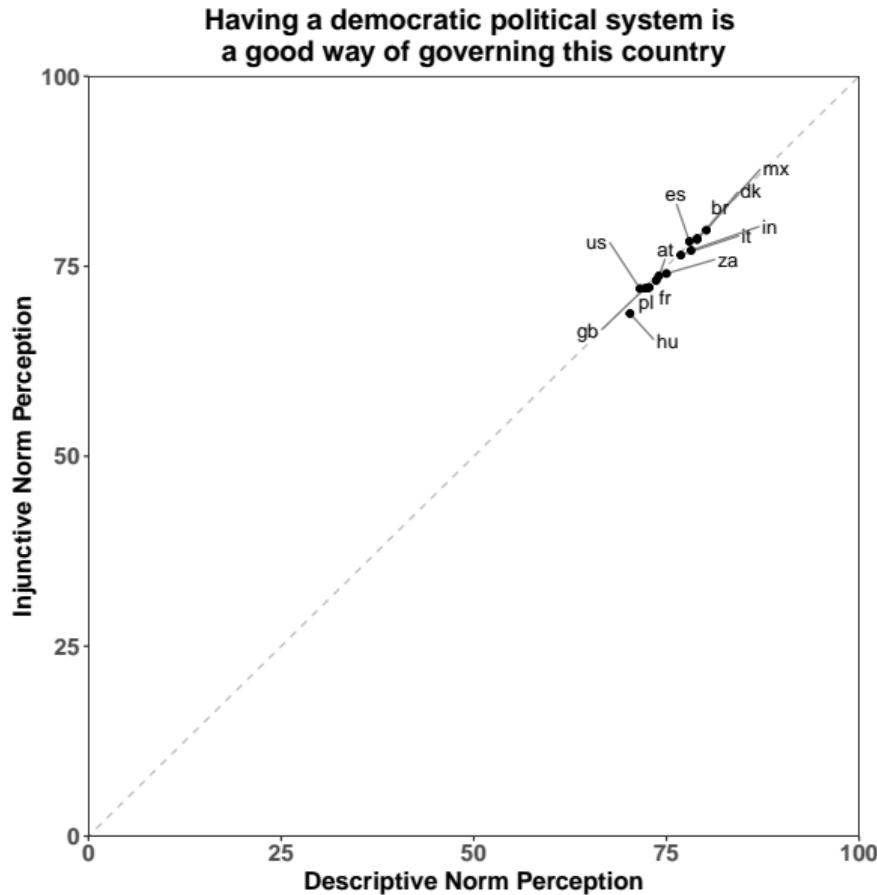
## Findings: descriptive, demo



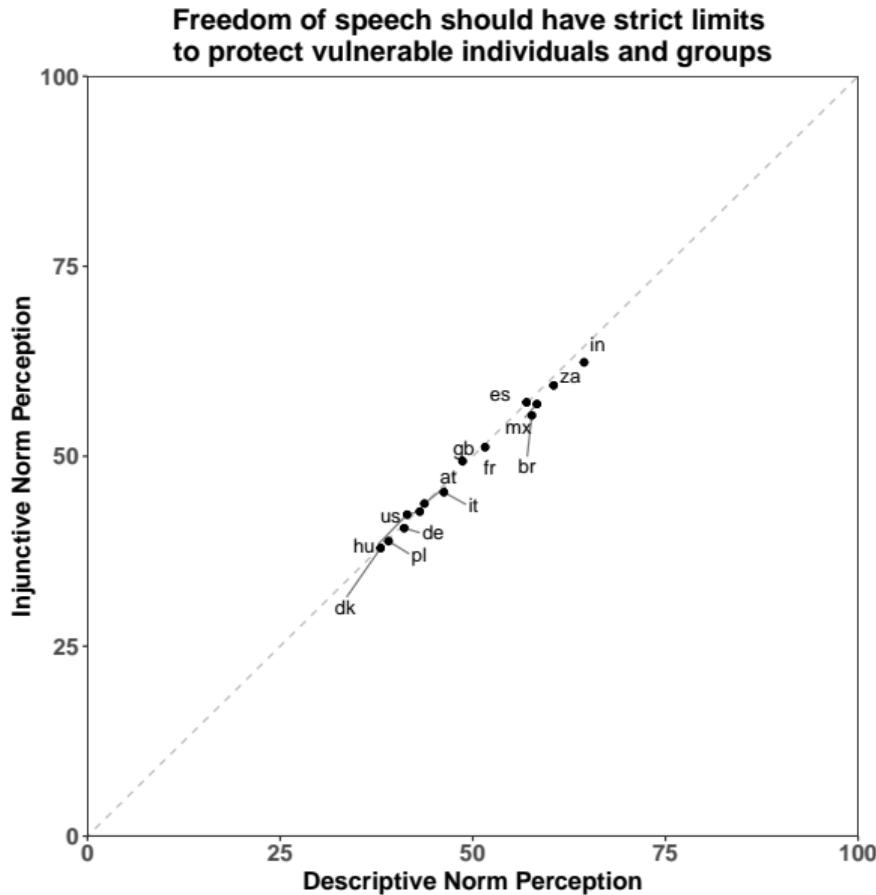
## Findings: descriptive, storming



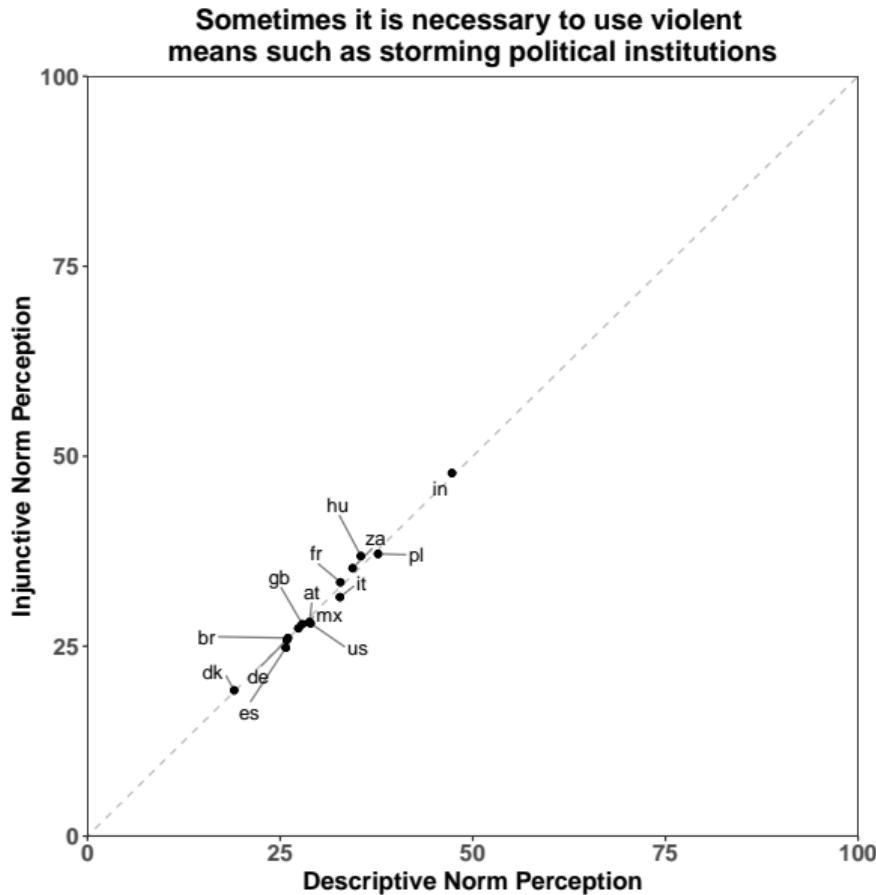
## Findings: Correlation between descriptive and injunctive



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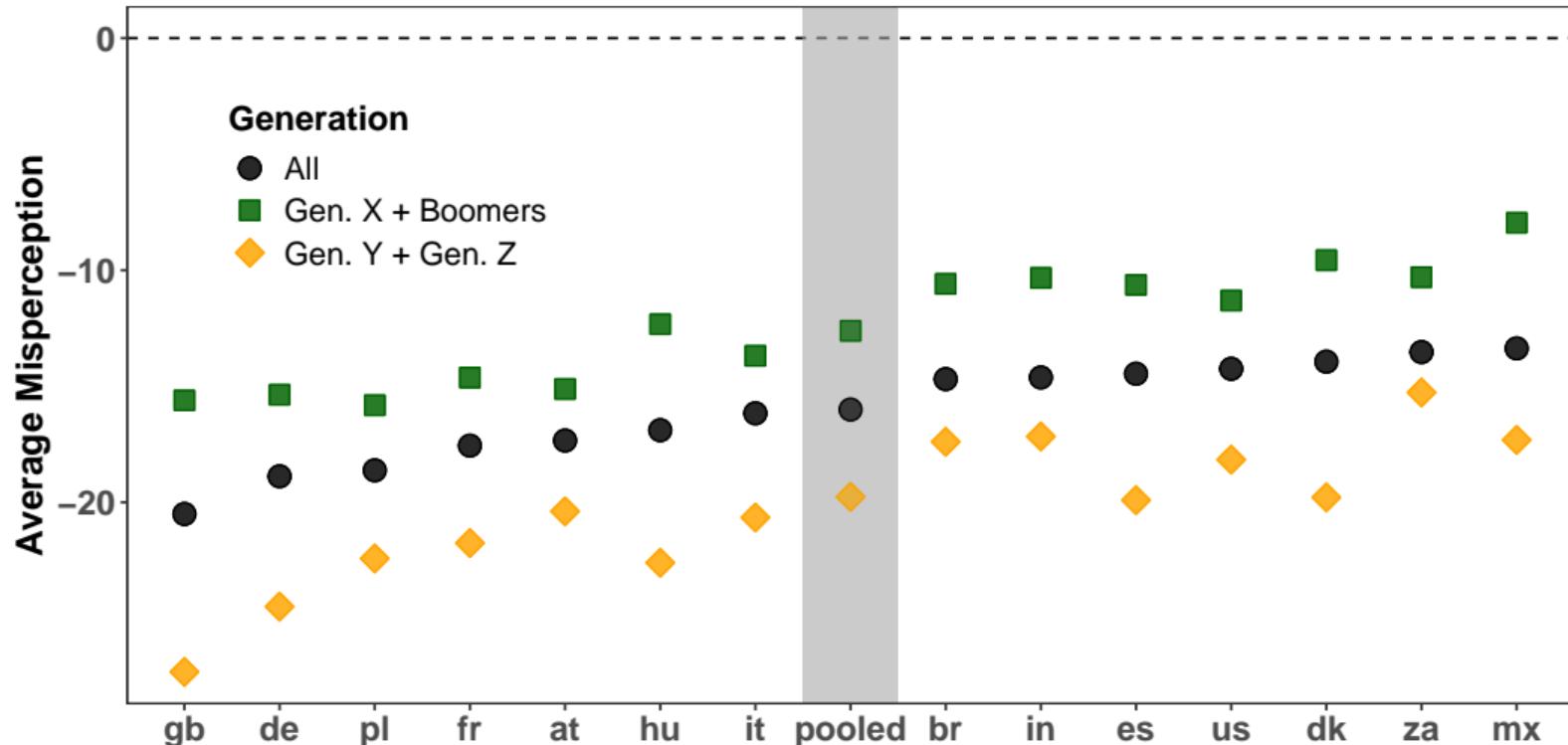


## Findings: Correlation between descriptive and injunctive

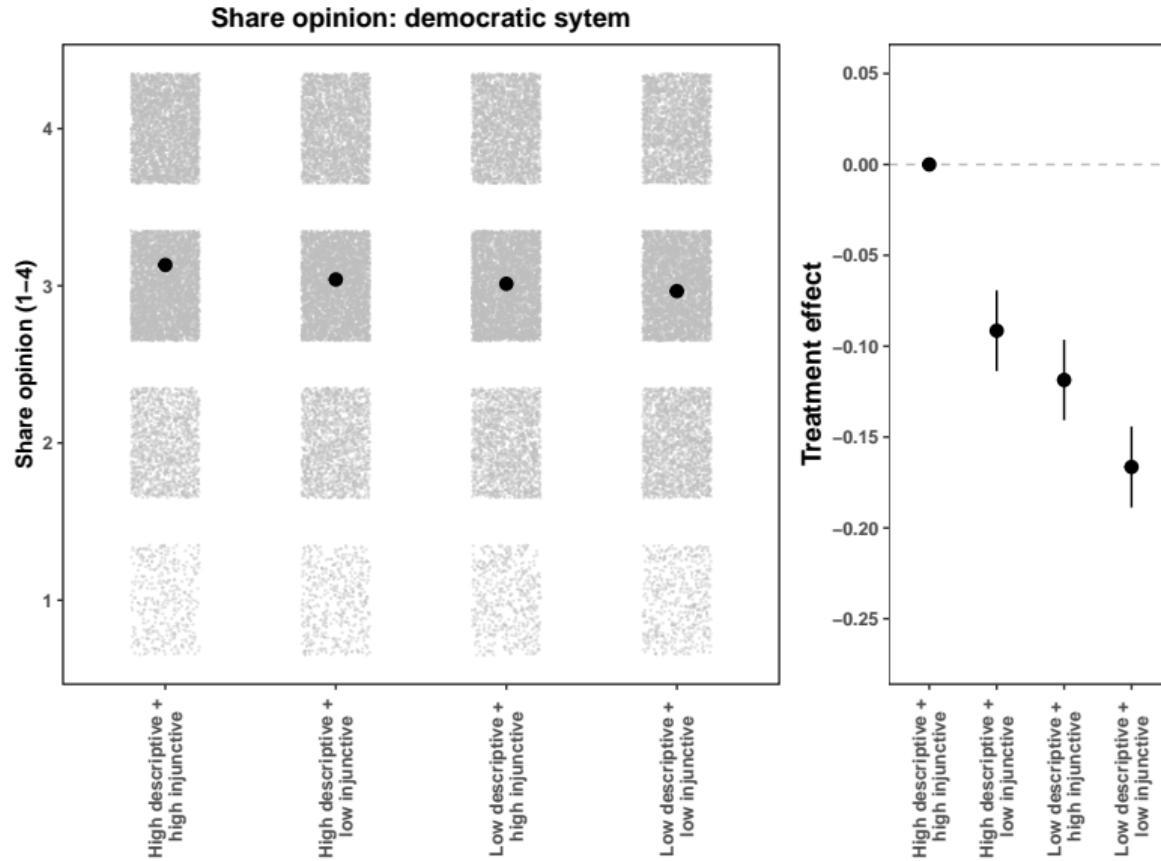


## *Key finding: generational drift*

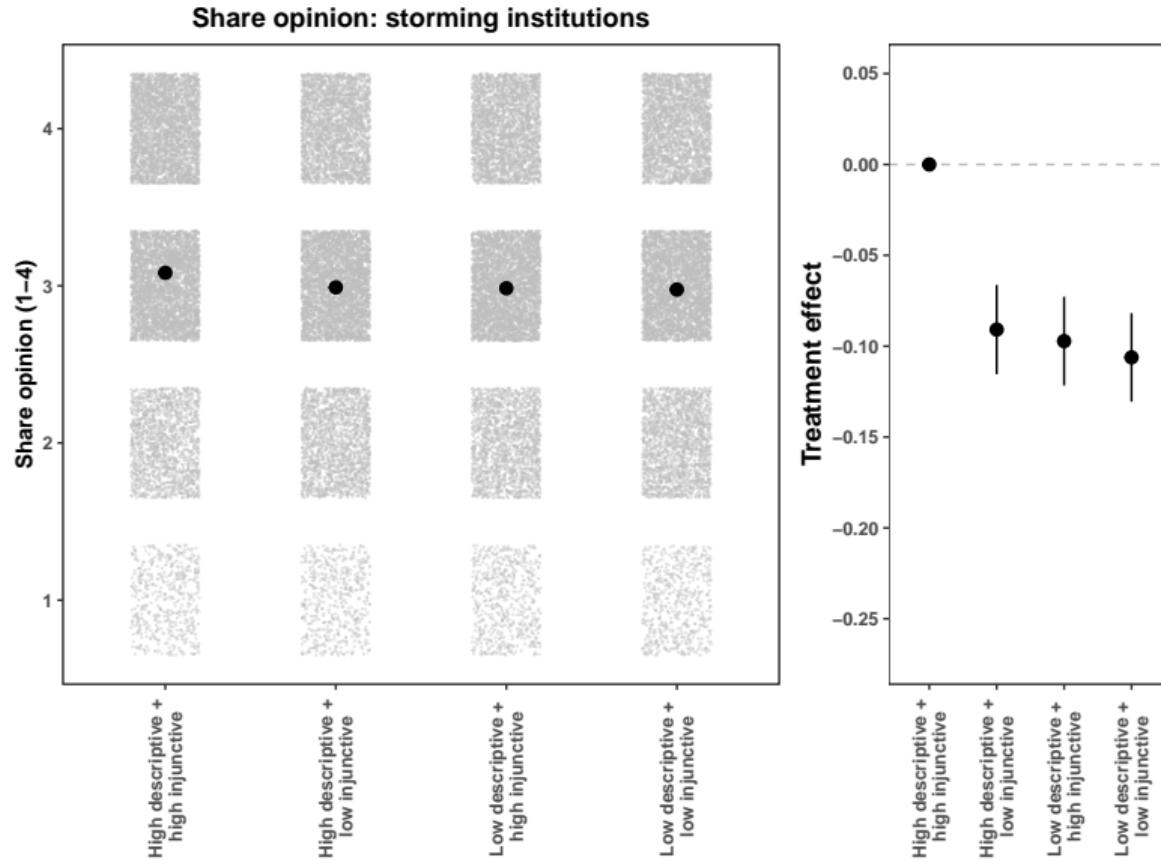
**Having a democratic political system is  
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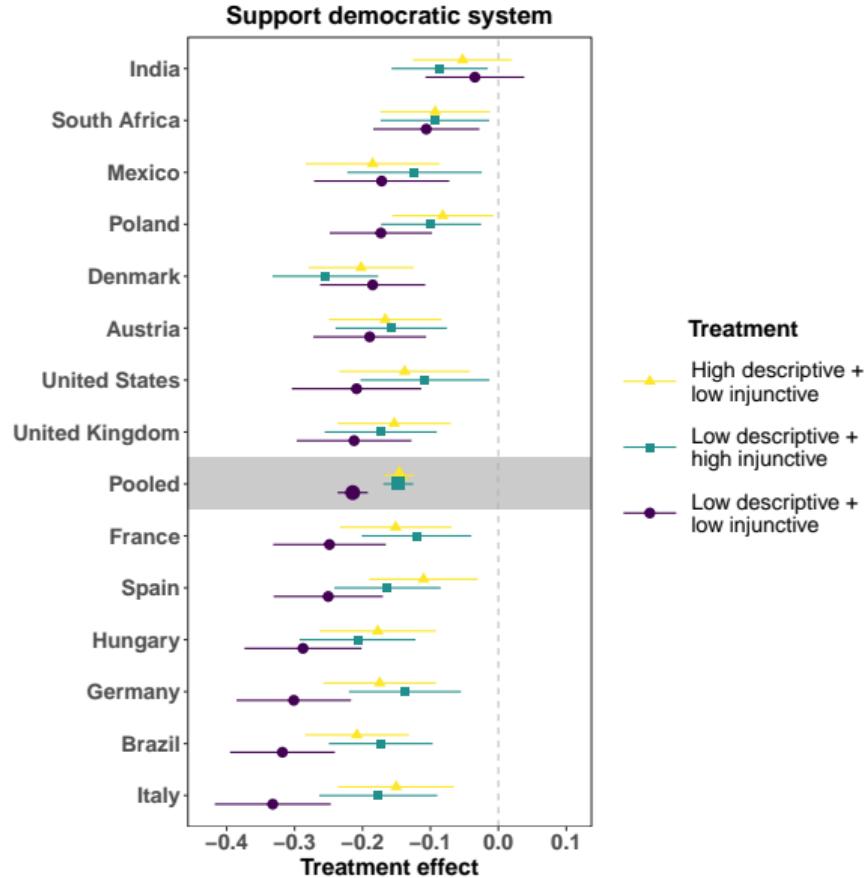
## Vignette: share opinion in public, demo



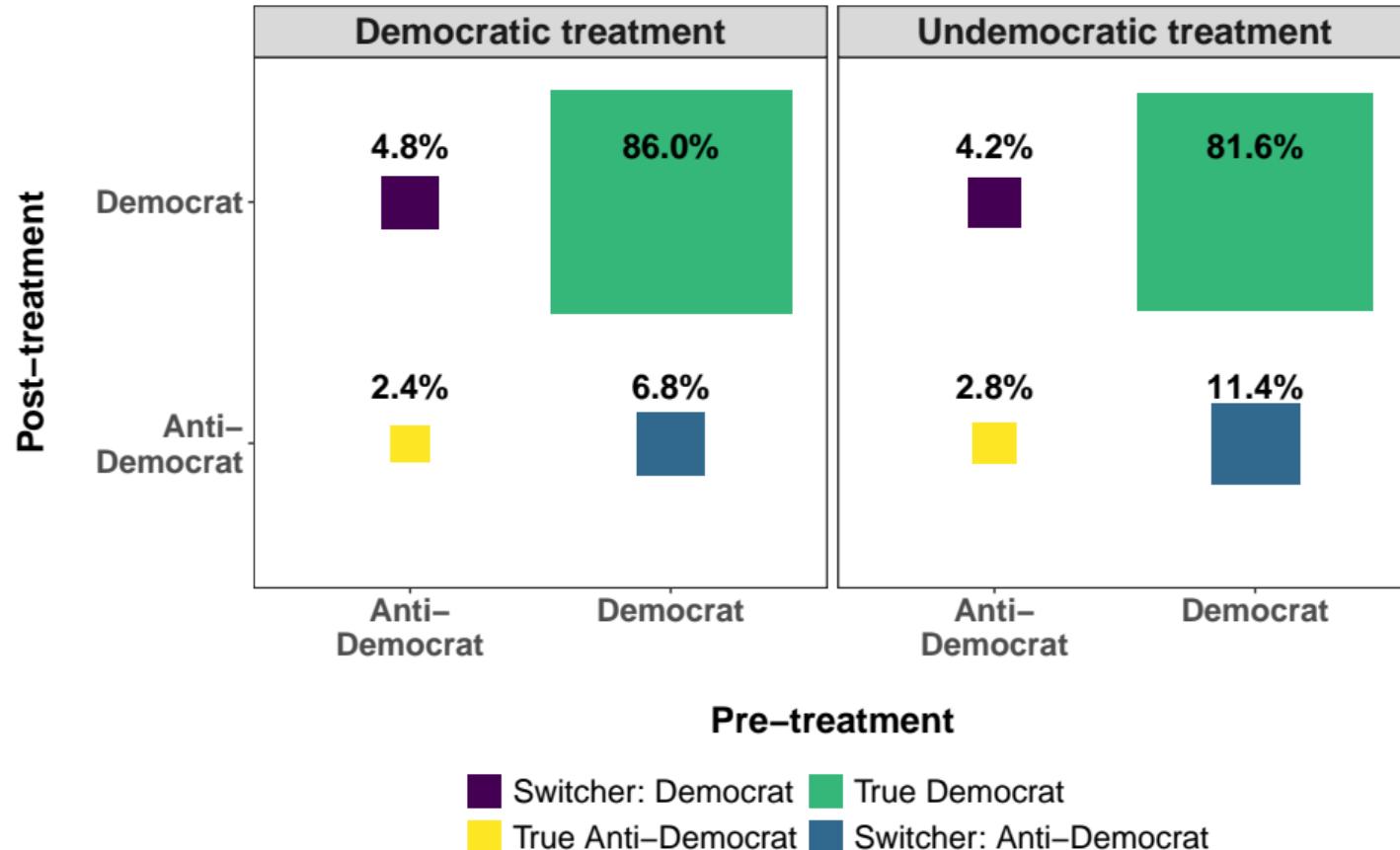
# Vignette: share opinion in public, storming



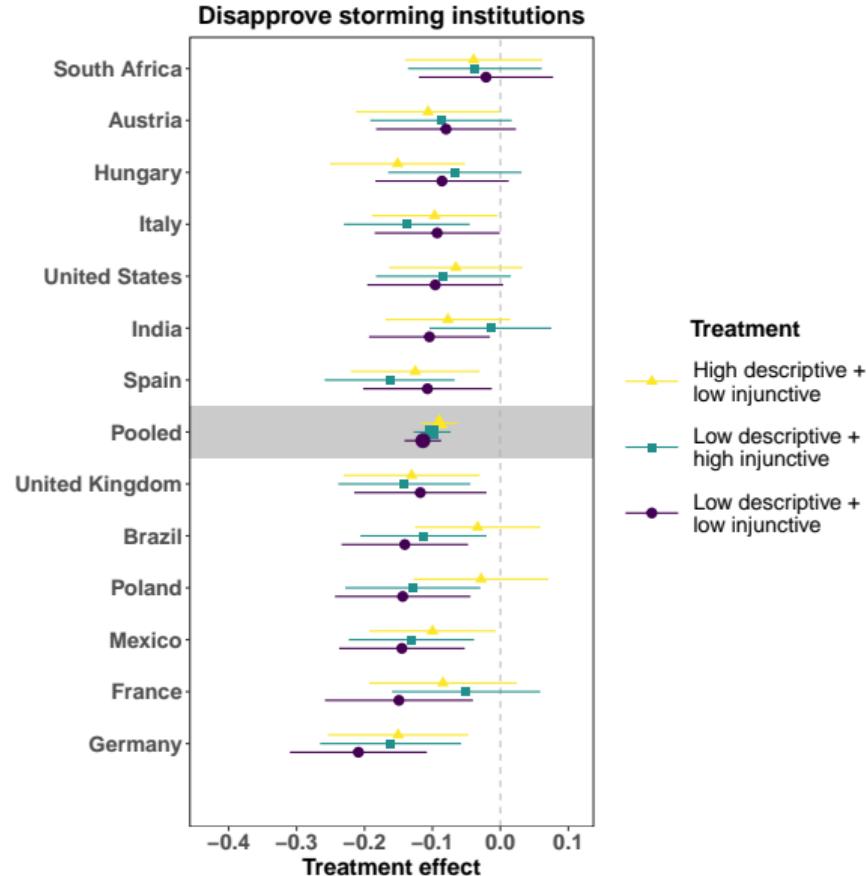
## Vignette: democracy, cross country



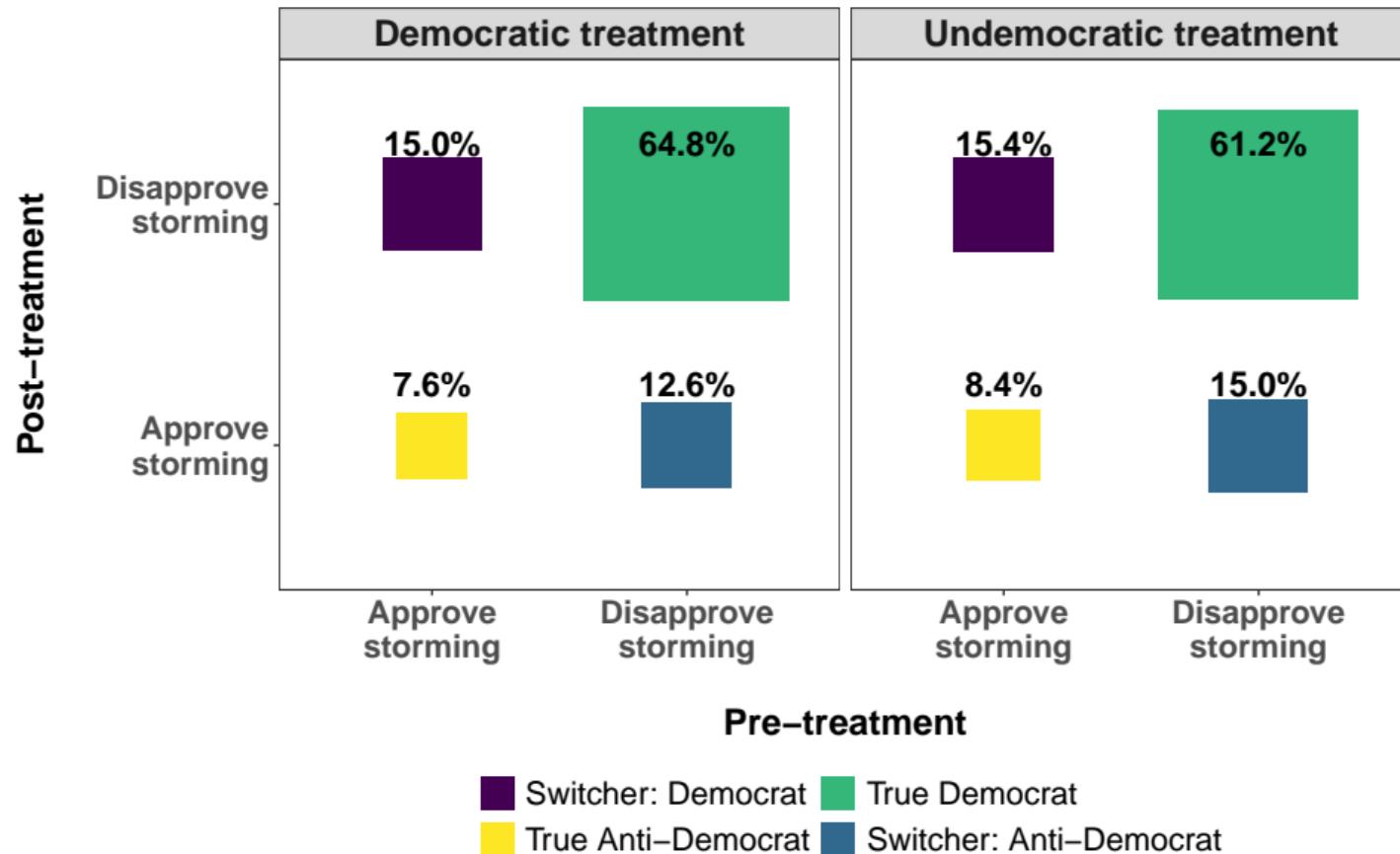
## Vignette: democracy, cross country



## Vignette: storming institutions, cross country



## Vignette: storming institutions, cross country



## *Intervention: approach*

In US, Poland, Hungary, Mexico, Brazil, India respondents ...

1. evaluate anti-democratic behavior by elites in presented survey (*e.g. Trump asking to find votes in 2020 US Presidential elections*)
2. answer open-ended questions to anti-democratic elite behavior

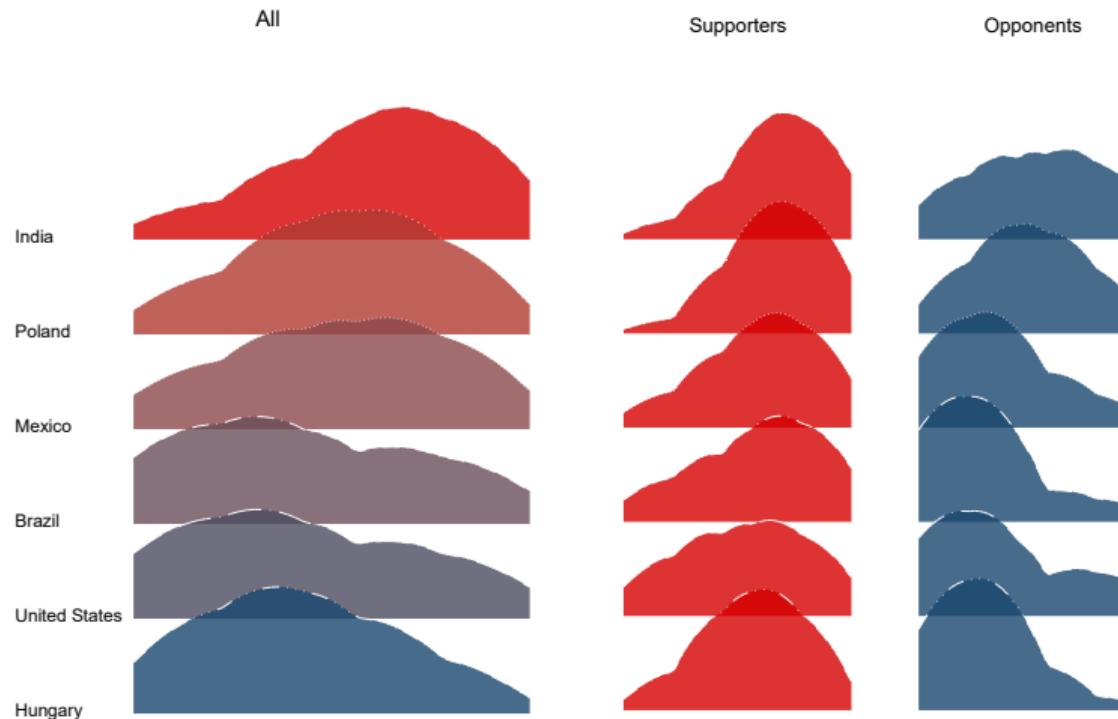
## *Intervention: approach*

1. hand labeling - arguments content analysis (random sample disapprovers open-ended answers N = 165)
2. arguments codebook:
  - disrespects voters' will,
  - manipulation,
  - well-functioning institutions,
  - unfounded/bad character
3. prompt engineering and fine-tuning: llama3 - few shots generative LLM (Meta 2024)
4. automated llama 3 classification of open-ended answers (N=8900): validation - more than 85% of arguments covered by our four types (only 8% "other" arguments)
5. integration in social norm intervention vignette "Common arguments people made against [violation attempts] were that they disrespect the will of voters, put well-functioning institutions at risk and manipulate them, and are based on falsehoods"

# *Intervention: measurement in wave 1*

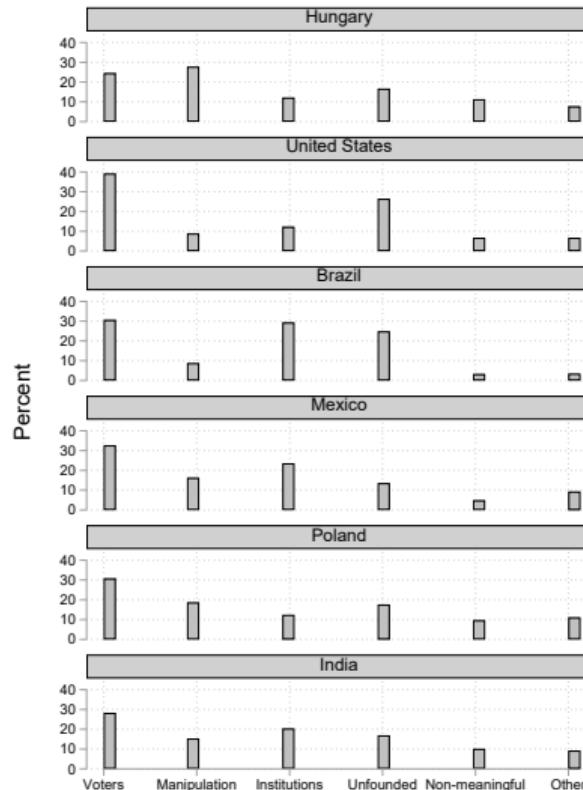
[back](#)

## Approval of Real-World Undemocratic Behavior



# Intervention: llama3 classifier results

[back](#)



# *Intervention: real-world scenario (data collection ongoing)*

[back](#)

Earlier this year, we asked **other people** – fellow US citizens just like yourself – what they think about this topic. The results were the following:

- A clear majority **disapprove** of contesting election results after losing an election.
- Majorities of both Republicans and Democrats **disapprove** of contesting election results after losing an election.
- Common arguments people made against the attempts to overturn the 2020 election were that they disrespect the will of voters, put well-functioning institutions at risk and manipulate them, and are based on falsehoods.

To which extent do you approve or disapprove of the efforts to overturn the 2020 election?

# Intervention: results (data collection ongoing)

[back](#)

