

Challenges to Democracy

Session 8: Democratic Norms and Affective Polarization

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Plan for today's session

- we've now learned how to define democracy and how they are challenged by elite actors
- **today:** how can norms on the citizen-level help us explain instances of backsliding

Examples of social norms

What's a social norm?

Examples of social norms



Figure: Throwing trash out the car window...

Examples of social norms



Figure: Queuing in the supermarket...

What social norms are...

Both cases are examples of social norms. A social norm can be found when “individuals usually act in a certain way and are often punished when seen not to be acting in this way.” (Axelrod 1986, p. 1986).

What social norms are...

"We are social animals embedded in thick networks of relations, and what we do has consequences, for us and for others.

Interdependence, not independence, rules social life." (Bicchieri 2017, p. 10)

- social norms consist of two components: **descriptive** element (what you think one should do); **injunctive** element (what you think others expect you to do)
 - descriptive norms are about empirical expectations
 - injunctive norms are about normative expectations

What social norms are...

- they are **conditional** as they are interdependent; and they are social since they depend on others in my social network (Bicchieri 2017)
- norm compliance hinges on potential punishment *and* individual support for the norm

Political norms

Political norms are “social norms that prescribe what political behaviours are deemed acceptable in a given social group in a given period” (Alvarez-Benjumea and Valentim 2024, p. 1)

Why are political norms so consequential?

Democracy in America

Before we summarize the paper together, take 2-3 minutes with your neighbor and try to discuss the main findings of the article.

- **Relevance, Gap and Question:**
- **Main Argument:**
- **Data and Analysis:**
- **Results:**
- **Implications:**

Theoretical Argument

$$u_i(X_j, M_j) = - \sum_{k=1}^K \alpha_k (x_{ik} - x_{jk})^2 - \delta M_j; \quad (1)$$

They use a fairly mathematical approach to show that...

- the more **extreme** and **intense** (α) voters' policy attitudes, the more they forgo democratic principles
- polarization inhibits democratic norms both at the citizen and elite level
- cross-cutting issues would help as they undermine strong preference of a voter for undemocratic candidates

Theoretical Argument

Question by Theo: The text identifies that people in the US consider democracy to be the best form of government. How is it, then, that almost no one is willing to give up political positions or party loyalty for the sake of democracy or democratic values (i.e., to bear the cost of protecting them)?

Research design

Study 1 is a **survey experiment** employed in the US ($n=1,691$) in 2018. *Why experiments?*

Research design

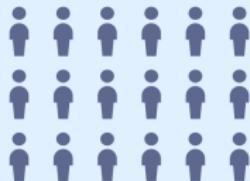
Control groups in research

Clinical trial to determine the effectiveness of a new antidepressant.

Control group

The control group takes 1 placebo
every morning

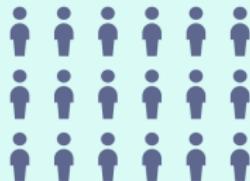
3% report an improvement



Treatment group

The treatment group takes 1 actual
antidepressant tablet every morning

82% report an improvement



Conclusion: The antidepressant is more effective than the placebo

Research design

Figure: The general idea of an experiment [Source: Scribbr](#)

How's the experiment by Graham and Svolik (2020) designed?

Research design

- participants exposed to a candidate choice task which varies candidates compliance with democratic norms
- in addition, voters are confronted with different positions on economic or social policies
- **treatment** condition: one candidate employs anti-democratic behaviour (regarding electoral fairness, checks and balances, civil liberties)
- **control**: no candidate behaves anti-democratically

How do they know how much weight voters put on policies (α) and whether they regard anti-democratic behavior as undemocratic?

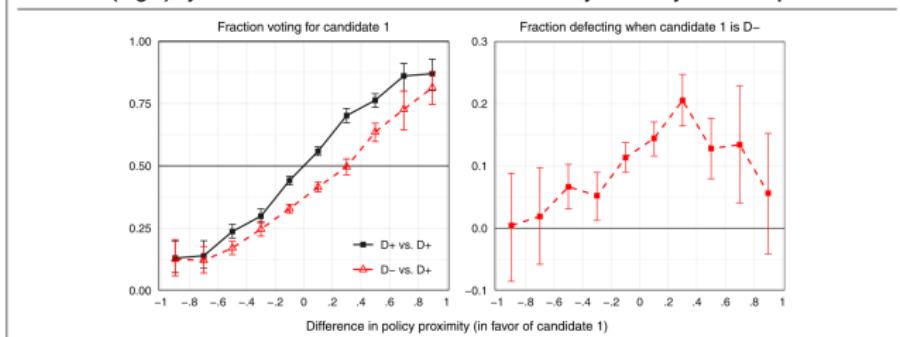
Research design

They follow a two-staged panel design:

- **first phase:** questions on voters policy preferences and perception of what constitutes anti-democratic behaviour
- **second phase:** survey experiment with candidate choice tasks

What do they find?

FIGURE 2. Fraction Voting for Candidate 1 (Left) and Fraction Defecting from the Less Democratic Candidate (Right) by the Difference between Candidates' in Policy Proximity to the Respondent



What are their main results?

What do they find?

- ...policy distance matters (a lot)
- ...anti-democratic behaviour only comes with a small punishment (decreases probability of voting by 11%)
- ...particularly centrist swing voters punish anti-democratic behaviour

Moreover, they also show that partisans develop a **double-standard**, punishing candidates from other parties more than from their own party (about 50% more likely).

What do they find?

Some additional findings:

- candidate polarization increases the problem, as candidates with more extreme positions are less punished
- variation in norm sanctioning by democratic principle (more likely to punish violations against free press and impartiality of courts; less for gerrymandering) [**why?**]
- violations against social norms are punished to a larger extent

Study 2

Study 2 is a **natural experiment** in Montana.

- **Setting:** 2017 competition over House Seat; shortly before elections, Republican competitor assaults journalist
- **Identification strategy:** Absentee voters have already voted; only in-person voters can be influenced by their assault;
- **Estimator:** difference-in-differences; shifts between prior election and current elections absentee and in-person voters
- **Main assumption:** in other characteristics, absentee and in-person voters do not differ; differences in votes can be attributed to the treatment

Study 2

Based on their prior study, they expect the punishment of anti-democratic behaviour to be weakest in partisan strongholds of Gianforte.

Study 2

FIGURE 9. Differences in Precinct-Level Vote Shifts for the Republican U.S. House Candidate in Montana between November 2016 and May 2017

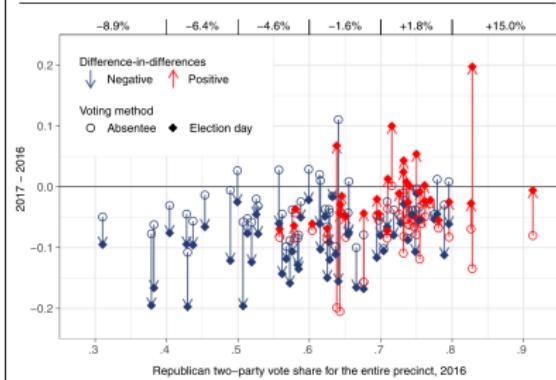


Figure: Results from the natural experiment (Graham and Svolik 2020, p. 405)

Anything surprising?

Any remaining questions?

Question by **Celine**: “To what extent can the findings of this study be transferred to other democracies, for example Germany, where party identification may be weaker and partisan loyalties may not play the same role as in the United States?”

Any remaining questions?

- Do you expect differences in norm implementation at different stages of democratization?
- Can we treat norm compliance as independent to policy preferences?

Summary

- **Research Question:** Does polarization increase the support for anti-democratic political elites?
- **Main Argument:** Voters decide based on policy preferences and candidates' compliance to democratic principles.
- **Data and Analysis:** Two original experiments from the US
- **Results:** Moderation sustains democracy, polarization undermines it.
- **Implications:** Even if attitudinal support for democracy remains high, polarization can weaken democratic norm implementation.

And in reality?

Frederiksen et al. (2025) design an experiment that exposes participants to real-world violations of democratic norms alongside hypothetical scenarios. *Would you expect similar effects?*

And in reality?

Table 2: Percentages of citizens disapproving of real-world and hypothetical undemocratic behavior.

	Real-world	Hypothetical
India	24.8%	36.5%
Poland	39.2%	77.8%
Mexico	41.9%	62.1%
Brazil	58.9%	71.4%
United States	59.9%	64.2%
Hungary	64.4%	71.8%
Pooled	47.5%	63.7%

Figure: Real-world vs. hypothetical violations of democratic norms

What to do about it?

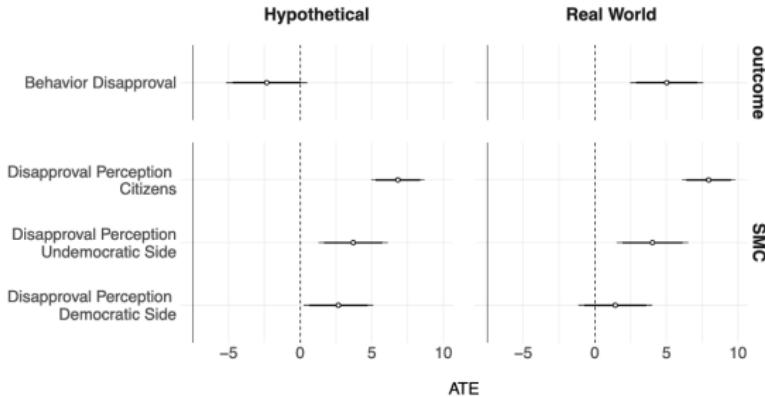


Figure: How interventions can correct support for anti-democratic behavior (Frederiksen et al. 2025)

Real world scenarios seem easier to counter.

Conclusion

What we have learned from today...

- What norms are and how they differ from attitudes.
- How norms can help to sustain democracy and when they fail to do so.
- What's the effect of polarization on norm implementation.

To prepare for next week...

- next week, already our final session on potential causes for democratic backsliding: global crises
- **mandatory reading:**
 - Cerkez, N. (2025). *Extreme Weather Events and the Support for Democracy*. <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:7b30c525-f621-46ee-9007-f52521568aca/files/s3f462793f>
- **complementary reading**
 - Mittiga, R. (2022). Political Legitimacy, Authoritarianism, and Climate Change. *American Political Science Review*, 116(3), 998–1011. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001301>

Any further questions?

Literature

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- Bicchieri, C. (2017). Diagnosing Norms. In C. Bicchieri (Ed.), *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms* (p. 0). Oxford University Press.
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Literature

Frederiksen, K., Le Corre Juratic, M., Allinger, T., & Bischof, D. (2025). *Democratic Transgressions Embedded in Reality*.

https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/42vhy_v1

Graham, M. H., & Svolik, M. W. (2020). Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States. *American Political Science Review*, 114(2), 392–409.

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