

# **CITIZEN SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY AND UNDEMOCRATIC PRACTICES**

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Thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa  
in partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Political Science

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by thanking my supervisor, Daniel Stockemer, for his continued support. Over the last three years, you have taught me countless lessons and allowed me to grow into a more reasoned and knowledgeable scholar. You have been relentless in your expectations of me, always believing in myself and pushing me to a level I did not even realize I could achieve. It is often said that to have a good PhD, you need a good supervisor. Looking back at my time as a PhD student at the University of Ottawa, I cannot stress enough how true this statement is. Your guidance and mentorship were unequivocally the most important factors in my success. I know for a fact that, wherever my academic career takes me, I will always have a loyal and committed mentor, co-author, and friend. Thank you.

To Kamila, Engi, Lou, Mathis, and all other colleagues at the KAS Chair and School of Political Studies, thank you. The PhD journey can be a lonely one, but your presence in the office has ensured mine was not. I will always look back at my time at uOttawa with fond memories of our gossiping sessions, spontaneous field trips, and KAS study days. Special mention for Kamila's unmatched pastry skills and the delicious sweet treats you brought to the office.

I am also grateful for the people outside the University of Ottawa—at conferences, workshops, and research stays abroad—who have provided feedback on my work, friendship, or hosted me. I am particularly grateful to Kevin Arceneaux at Sciences Po, who graciously accepted to host me as a visiting PhD student. You have been a tremendous source of knowledge and your impact on my development as a researcher is substantial. I always look forward to our discussions. Thank

you also to Rodrigo Praino at Flinders University for hosting me at the Jeff Bleich Centre for Democracy. My experience in Adelaide has been tremendously helpful in my doctoral journey and I look forward to joining the JBC and Flinders University team as a research fellow.

Lastly, and most importantly, merci à ma famille. Maman, papa, je ne serais pas dans la position que je suis sans les solides bases que vous m'avez données. J'ai une chance incroyable d'avoir des parents comme vous, qui allez toujours m'encourager à poursuivre mes rêves. Ely, Felix, et Vava, vous avez été des points d'ancrage indéniable tout au long de mes études : je vous en remercie infiniment. Ophélie, même si nous n'étions pas toujours près l'un de l'autre ces dernières années, tu as toujours été là pour moi. Tes visites à Ottawa, Toronto, et Paris ont toujours été des périodes ré-énergisante pour moi ; je ne crois pas avoir pu y arriver sans ton soutien. Un petit salut spécial à Victor, qui malgré mes efforts est arrivé avant ma défense de thèse !

## Abstract

This dissertation examines the puzzle of citizen support for undemocratic practices through three lenses; each explored in a distinct research article. These articles consider, respectively, the roles of partisanship, democratic trade-offs, and age in explaining support for undemocratic practices.

The first article begins with an empirical assessment of the subversion dilemma framework across three moderately polarized and multiparty systems. According to this perspective, individual support for undemocratic practices stems, at least partly, from increasingly negative perceptions of opposing partisans' commitment to democracy. The underlying mechanism argues that, in light of these misperceptions, the rational response is to turn to undemocratic practices to remain electorally and ideologically competitive. Using an expanded conceptualization of undemocratic practices, this first study tests the framework in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. The results indicate that misperceptions of out-partisans' commitment to democracy do not substantively explain citizen support for democratic subversion in these three contexts. The results are found to be inconsistent across different types of undemocratic practices, raising questions about the generalizability of existing research between contexts and over an expanded understanding of the concept of *undemocratic practices*.

In the second article, I investigate the extent to which citizens are willing to trade different dimensions of democracy for better physical and material security. While existing studies on popular support for democratic backsliding have extensively focused on candidate choice experiments, these do not capture the extent to which individuals intrinsically value undemocratic

alternatives. In the few studies that look beyond candidates and focus on support for undemocratic practices, results indicate a substantial willingness among citizens to disregard democracy for better economic and physical conditions. Building on these findings, I test the willingness to trade five different dimensions of democracy for better physical and material security (i.e., stronger economy and lower crime rates). The objective is to understand whether citizens' preferences for different dimensions/institutions of democracy shape their willingness to engage in democratic trade-offs. Using a pre-registered conjoint experiment in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, I demonstrate that citizens are less willing to compromise on elections and political rights, but more open to forgo accountability mechanisms. These findings make a substantial contribution to the literature on citizen support for democratic backsliding by identifying which dimensions of democracy people are least (and most) likely to abandon.

In the third and final article of this dissertation, I shift my focus to a demographic variable: age. More specifically, this research is interested in understanding whether and to what extent younger citizens' disconnect with democracy is fueling a shift towards undemocratic practices. I rely on a multi-method approach to examine differences in democratic attitudes across age groups. Using observational and experimental data, I provide robust cross-national evidence that younger citizens' support for democracy is substantially lower than older citizens. Building on these findings, I further demonstrate that youth are far more tolerant of a wide range of undemocratic practices and democratic norm violations. Lastly, I present the results of a conjoint experiment which confirms that younger citizens have significantly lower preferences for democratic societal attributes when compared to their older counterparts. Substantively, these findings contribute to a growing literature on the vulnerability of consolidated democracies to younger peoples' shifting attitudes towards democratic institutions and norms.

# Preface

The three articles that compose this dissertation are under consideration as solo-authored manuscripts in the following peer-reviewed journals at the time of the thesis defence:

1. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau. (2025a). “Do misperceptions of out-partisans’ commitment to democracy fuel support for undemocratic practices” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties (Under Review)*.
2. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau. (2025b). “Are people equally willing to trade different dimensions of democracy for physical and material security?” *European Political Science Review (Under Review)*
3. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau. (2025c). “Critical or Antipathetic? Evaluating Young People’s Tolerance for Undemocratic Politics in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom” *PS: Political Science & Politics (Under Review)*.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

When I began my doctoral studies in 2022, more than half of the world’s democracies were classified as *backsliding* (Serhan, 2022). Evidence of this “eroding state” of democracy was—and still is—abundant. To name a few recent examples, Marine Le Pen—the presidential candidate for the far-right National Rally—obtained the largest vote share for a nationalist candidate in the history of France during the 2022 presidential election (Leicester, 2022); in Canada, a series of illegitimate far-right protests took place nationwide in early 2022, with a four-week sit-in blockade in the country’s capital (Gillies et al., 2023); and in April of the same year, Hungary’s populist leader Viktor Orbán secured re-election to a fourth term with a supermajority of seats in the legislature (Spike, 2022). Even more recently, the far-right authoritarian populist party *Alternativ für Deutschland* achieved its highest vote share, becoming the second-largest group in the German Parliament (Pfeifer, 2025).

These examples are not isolated incidents; they represent a pattern of declining democratic norms and the rise of illiberal politics worldwide. Beyond the confines of electoral politics, many countries have witnessed crackdowns on independent media, judicial overreach, and targeted suppression of opposition voices. In Poland, for instance, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) leveraged its eight years in power to erode the independence of the judiciary, undermining the checks and balances that are essential to a functioning democracy (Bernhard, 2021). In Turkey, media suppression and mass arrests following the failed coup attempt in 2016 have severely restricted individual freedoms, transforming the nation’s democratic landscape into a model of competitive

authoritarianism (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016). This backsliding continues to unfold, with incumbent President Erdogan cracking down on his opposition by arresting his main rival, Istanbul mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, ahead of the presidential elections to be held no later than 2028 (Kirby, 2025). More recently, the newly erected US Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE)—acting under the auspices of would-be autocratic President Trump—has dismantled the professional and non-partisan bureaucracy, attacked research institutions and academic freedom, and have proceeded with executive actions that were previously deemed unconstitutional by judicial rulings (Thulin, 2025; Levitsky and Way, 2025).

The persistence of such developments forces us to confront a troubling reality: the erosion of democracy is not solely the work of authoritarian leaders but also the result of public support and tolerance. Various surveys support this perspective. Data shows that nearly one in four Americans endorses the use of political violence against political opponents (Smith, 2023), and just under half believe losing candidates should contest the outcome of free and fair elections (Goldman et al., 2024). A 2019 survey conducted in over 34 countries revealed that 46 percent of respondents were open to restricting the freedoms of opposition parties, while 41 percent approved of limiting opponents' access to web content (Wike & Schumacher, 2020). These statistics indicate that the erosion of democracy is often facilitated by its very citizens, whose support legitimizes undemocratic practices and allows would-be autocrats to seize control of institutions.

Yet, paradoxically, global support for democracy as an ideal remains robust (Goldman et al., 2024; Wike et al., 2017). In fact, a global survey by the Pew Research Center indicates that more than 78 per cent of respondents across 38 countries support representative democracy. Even in nations experiencing democratic backsliding or a populist wave, a majority still express preference for democratic governance. For instance, survey data suggests that more than 87 per cent of

Americans agree that having a democracy is good and 70 per cent prefer democracy over any other alternative (Goldman et al., 2024). In Germany, 9 out of 10 citizens indicate being committed to democracy (Wike et al., 2017). French citizens also exhibit high levels of commitment to their regime type, with less than 10 per cent of citizens being open to non-democratic alternatives (Wike et al., 2017). This contradiction—strong abstract support for democracy coupled with the growing endorsement of undemocratic practices—forms the central puzzle of this dissertation.

By examining this paradox, this research aims to understand the complex motivations behind citizens' support for undemocratic policies. This understanding is vital not only for the academic discourse on democratic stability but also for informing policy interventions designed to strengthen democratic resilience (see, for instance, Voelkel et al., 2024). The area of research which focuses on public support for undemocratic practices is still in its nascent phase relative to other research agendas, particularly in comparison to research on democratic attitudes and electoral behaviour. A quick search for “democratic attitudes” on leading academic database JSTOR yields over 211,000 results, while a search for “undemocratic attitudes” only yields 9,957.<sup>1</sup> While this alone does not constitute a valid empirical demonstration of the research gap on support for undemocratic alternatives, it nonetheless reflects a clear trend in the political science scholarship: there is a need for more research on undemocratic attitudes.

In this dissertation, I identify two important limitations in the literature as it stands: first, there is an overwhelming focus on the United States as a case study for the development and empirical demonstration of theoretical mechanisms. This poses significant problems since there is little research to help us understand whether the theoretical advancements carry equal explanatory power in non-American contexts. Second, there are some important conceptual inconsistencies in

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<sup>1</sup> For reference, this search was conducted on 15 April 2025.

the measurement of individual support for undemocratic practices. Addressing these limitations is a core focus of this project. With this dissertation, I therefore seek to broaden the comparative scope of research on citizen support for undemocratic practices and provide more whole-of-picture theoretical as well as empirical insights.

To achieve these aims, this dissertation will approach the topic of public support for undemocratic practices through three distinct and complementary lenses. To be more precise, I focus here on three main theoretical perspectives: partisan misperceptions, democratic trade-offs (economic and crime-based), and age. These three approaches constitute some of the most salient and important in the study of democratic support and legitimacy. As the most central source of political identity in contemporary democracies, partisanship is a usual suspect in the study of democratic erosion (Graham and Svobik, 2020). As for the idea of economic and crime-based democratic trade-offs, they are a more novel area of research, with only a handful of studies looking into the role of preferences for physical and material security in shaping support for undemocratic alternatives (see Adserà et al., 2023; Neundorff et al., 2024). Thirdly, age constitutes an important variable which has not received the attention it deserves. Barring the rare seminal pieces on youth and democracy (see Foa and Mounk, 2016; 2019), no research systematically investigates the role of age in explaining support for specific undemocratic practices. Ultimately, this research seeks to study these three theoretical perspectives with revamped conceptual bases and extended comparative coverage. The overarching goal of this dissertation is therefore to understand how, within the literature on public support for undemocratic practices, existing theoretical perspectives react to 1) more specific conceptual considerations; and 2) empirical testing outside the United States.

Before delving further into this project, I wish to clarify that I use terms such as “undemocratic practices”; “undemocratic behaviour”; “anti-democratic policies”; or “undemocratic alternatives” interchangeably to identify the main variable of this dissertation. More specifically, these terms refer to transgressions of the conventions of liberal democracy, including competitive elections, the rule of law, and minority rights (Dahl, 1971; Merkel, 2004). Undemocratic practices therefore include limiting the ability of citizens to participate freely in the political process, hindering independent organizations and agencies charged with democratic accountability, and making changes to the rule of law that disproportionately affect certain groups of citizens (O’Donnell, 2004). The term *undemocratic practices* can thus be considered a catch-all phrase to include any actions that infringe equal opportunity of political participation and the rule of law, two fundamental principles of democracy. Since conceptual clarification is one of the objectives underlying this project, I leave some room for the next chapters to expand on this basic definition and provide a clearer conceptualization of what we mean when we measure support for *undemocratic practices*.

As an article-based dissertation, this thesis will proceed as follows. First, I will provide an overview of the literature on citizen support for undemocratic practices. This chapter will focus on identifying what we know about why individuals turn their back on democracy to embrace illiberal and undemocratic alternatives. In doing so, this second chapter will situate the current dissertation within the literature, positioning the contributions of this work with the broader theoretical and empirical development of the research agenda. The third chapter will then turn to the methodological framework. In this section, I will discuss the multi-method approach leveraged in the three articles and elaborate on the case selection. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 will present the three articles which compose this dissertation. Lastly, chapters 7 and 8 will provide an overarching

discussion of the dissertation's findings as well as concluding remarks. These two final chapters will help situate the contributions of the articles within the broader literature on citizen support for undemocratic practices.

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representative-and-direct-democracy/

## Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theory

For a long time, conventional wisdom held that democracies broke down due to power-hungry elites and/or exogenous shocks through military conflict or coup d'états (Marinov & Goemans, 2014; Peic & Reiter, 2011). More recently, scholars argue that democracies no longer die a quick and sudden death but rather die through a slow and long period of deconsolidation (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Indeed, studies of democratic backsliding demonstrate that, nowadays, the death of a liberal democracy is marked by persistent patterns of negligence characterized by the erosion of civic norms and an upsurge in support for undemocratic behaviour (Armaly & Enders, 2022; Frederiksen & Skaaning, 2023).

In line with these new developments on democratic deconsolidation, a growing body of literature now investigates the role of citizens as potential contributors to democratic backsliding (Goodman, 2022). Previously neglected in a literature centred on elites and exogenous shocks, citizens are now a central component of the puzzle of democratic instability. Crucial to this new area of inquiry are attempts to answer the paradox of why citizens sometimes support (or tolerate) undemocratic practices.

In this chapter, I review the burgeoning literature on citizen support for democratic backsliding and present more thoroughly two shortcomings that are at the heart of this dissertation. More specifically, this chapter will dive into a review of the individual-level factors identified in existing research as explaining greater support for undemocratic practices. This overview will bring to light three theoretical perspectives which—for various empirical and theoretical reasons—deserve

additional scholarly attention: these are partisanship, democratic trade-offs, and age. The chapter will end with a discussion of the main theoretical and empirical contributions of the articles presented in this thesis, positioning them in the existing literature.

## **Who Supports Undemocratic Practices? And Why?**

Researchers have pursued various areas of inquiry in trying to understand citizen support for undemocratic practices. Most of this research agenda can be divided between the demand and supply sides. On one hand, some scholars focus on the most common suppliers (i.e., producers) of undemocratic practices, including political elites and candidates. Such studies consider how elites can “sell” or “supply” policies and behaviours which infringe the principles of democracy or how institutional design can influence public tolerance for backsliding (Frederiksen, 2022b; 2022c; 2024). On the other hand, some recent works consider the individual factors which can explain citizens’ “demand” for undemocratic alternatives. Such studies highlight endogenous mechanisms that can explain why some citizens are open to undemocratic actions. These include individual difference factors (Frederiksen, 2023; Christensen et al., 2024), psychological predispositions, and political/social attitudes to name but a few (Braley et al., 2023; Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Pasek et al., 2022).

### **Supply-side Research**

Beginning with the supply-side literature, two strands of research emerge: those focusing on political elites and those that consider institutional constraints. Several studies consider how the supply and suppliers of undemocratic policies can influence citizens’ support for such actions. Frederiksen (2022b), for instance, demonstrates that individuals are more likely to tolerate and support undemocratic political leaders when they appear competent. This finding is further

supported by research that demonstrate a clear link between support for undemocratic leaders and economic growth (Breitenstein, 2019; Klačnja et al., 2021). Therefore, according to these studies, citizens are willing to tolerate undemocratic leaders if these politicians deliver strong economic performances and favourable living conditions (Bertsou & Caramani, 2022; De Vries & Solaz, 2017).

Another strand of supply-side research focuses on the role of institutional design in driving both the supply and tolerance of undemocratic practices. According to this research agenda, political systems with multiple political parties are more likely to lead citizens to punish undemocratic incumbents at the polls (Frederiksen, 2022a, 2022c). The argument is straightforward: when the number of political parties within a country is low, the cost of switching one's support to another political party increases and therefore citizens are more likely to continue supporting an undemocratic leader from their own party than turn to another party. This has been an especially important factor in the study of support for undemocratic practices in two-party systems such as the United States (Frederiksen, 2022a). Orhan (2022) points out that the increase in the cost of party defection is directly related to the strength of partisan identity, which is particularly more salient in two-party systems (Dalton, 2008). Accordingly, party systems and the number of effective political parties directly influences the *effective* supply of undemocratic policies and practices. In countries with fewer political parties, citizens may not punish undemocratic leaders or politicians because the cost of defection to another political party is simply too high.

### **Demand-side Research**

Moving on to the demand side literature, some scholars have theorized that individual support for democracy may not be symmetrical at the conceptual and practical levels (McClosky, 1964). They

argue that individuals may support the idea of democracy but reject components of democratic practice that do not align with their specific interests (Easton, 1975). This is also in line with studies that argue that social and political identities shape citizen's conception of democracy, leading individuals to support the democracy they themselves define with a biased lens (Bryan, 2023; Wunsch et al., 2022). According to these explanations, citizens may support objectively undemocratic practices because they believe them to be democratically aligned from their own point of view.

Outside of the normative conceptions of individuals, some scholars have argued that citizens may simply seek to prioritize their political and economic interests at the expense of certain democratic principles (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Graham & Svobik, 2020). This follows the findings according to which citizens support undemocratic leaders who deliver strong economic and welfare results. However, these demand-side studies highlight more importantly that it is not necessarily objective economic performance but rather subjective perceptions of economic and social performance that matter (Kriekhaus et al., 2014). Indeed, support for undemocratic practices is lower when individuals believe that these actions benefit their interests, regardless of objective performance indicators (Cordero & Simón, 2016; Konstantinidis & Xezonakis, 2013; Zagórski, 2006).

Partisanship also stands out as an important demand-side factor to explain support for democratic backsliding. In a recent study of American and Canadian citizens, Gidengil et al. (2022) find that most partisans are willing to weaken restraints on the executive branch of government for the sake of promoting their ideological policy agendas. These findings are supported by a growing comparative literature but also face some barriers in terms of generalization (see Gessler & Wunsch, 2023; Graham & Svobik, 2020; Orhan, 2022).

Building on the role of partisanship, recent works argue that the growing disregard for democratic conventions by ordinary citizens can be explained by their exaggerated perceptions of political opponent's disregard of democracy and the rule of law (Braley et al., 2023; Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Pasek et al., 2022). Relying on the foundations of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and recent research on political sectarianism (Finkel et al., 2020), scholars argue that an individual will be more likely to support policies and behaviours which infringe democratic principles when they (mis)perceive that their political opponents pose a threat to democracy (Braley et al., 2023; Pasek et al., 2022). Simply put, the mechanism argues that regardless of citizens' commitment to democratic principles, they may be prone to support undemocratic practices if they consider that these principles are only normative within their own political group (Pasek et al., 2022).

Alternatively, some studies also suggest that individuals may simply not place democracy top of their list of personal priorities. This is supported by conjoint experiments on individual preferences for material and physical security relative to democracy (Adserà et al., 2023; Neundorff et al., 2024). In these studies, the authors find that some citizens prefer economic outcomes and physical security (i.e., lower crime rates) to democracy, highlighting the possibility that individuals may tolerate undemocratic practices in exchange for optimal economic and physical security conditions. In times of economic downturns and higher crime rates, citizens' willingness to give up on democracy may therefore be higher, allowing undemocratic leaders to more easily "sell" undemocratic practices.

Lastly, some studies consider how individual-level characteristics can explain why some citizens support undemocratic practices. Frederiksen (2023), for example, finds that younger citizens are more tolerant of undemocratic policies than more senior citizens. Education also

appears to be important, with educated citizens exhibiting more robust support for democratic principles (Collingwood, 2012). Conversely, uneducated individuals tend to be more supportive of alternatives to representative democracy (Coffé & Michels, 2014).

Overall, this review of the literature on support for undemocratic practices demonstrates the broadness of the research agenda. While this does not constitute a problem in and of itself, it does go to show that this literature is in an ongoing development and is worthy of greater attention. From structural supply-side arguments to intrinsic individual-level factors, the puzzle of citizen support for undemocratic practices is a fertile ground for research.

### **Context and Concept: The Two Major Limitations of Existing Research**

From this review of existing works, I identify two shortcomings with the literature on support for undemocratic practices. First, and most apparent, much of the research agenda has evolved asymmetrically, with overdue attention being given to the United States at the expense of other consolidated democracies. Of course, the erosion of democratic norms is not a purely American problem, and our understanding of the processes which can explain why citizens support undemocratic practices must consider this reality. This is particularly problematic because of the uniqueness of the bipartisan presidential system of the United States, which is known for its high levels of political polarization and dissimilarity with other more widespread political systems (Iyengar et al., 2019; Kingzette et al., 2021; Layman et al., 2006).

#### **The United States and the Generalization Problem**

Looking at some of the most influential work on the study of citizen support for undemocratic practices, we find an overwhelming majority of studies conducted in the United States. This is the case for works on the role of partisanship and partisan animosity (Braley et al., 2023; Druckman,

2023; Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Pasek et al., 2022) and to a lesser extent works on youth and democracy (Foa and Mounk, 2019). This US-centrism limits the generalizability of the literature and highlights the need to expand our understanding of support for undemocratic practices beyond the confines of a unique case study, particularly when developing theoretical mechanisms. This is especially true since most contemporary democracies are unlike the United States and have complex multiparty structures with frequent inter-party cooperation (Bantel, 2023; Huddy et al., 2018). We could therefore expect different findings in different settings. In the case of partisanship, for example, differences in party systems may moderate the effect of polarization on support for undemocratic practices, particularly if we consider the number of effective political parties and the higher cost of defection in two-party systems (Frederiksen, 2022a). This is only one example of how setting can play a role in the understanding of individual-level mechanisms, and why it is important to look beyond single case studies, especially when these are done in countries as unique (in terms of political system and culture) as the United States.

Apart from the fact that the United States has a unique bipartisan presidential system which is fairly uncommon in other consolidated democracies, there is another argument as to why focusing on the United States to study support for undemocratic practices is not ideal. This argument is that the United States is, under the Presidency of Donald Trump, rapidly suffering from executive aggrandizement and democratic backsliding (Thulin, 2025; Levitsky and Way, 2025). This creates a problem whereby the supply of undemocratic practices and attitudes by the government may be interfering with and fueling citizens' support for these practices. This is supported by recent research which demonstrates how support for illiberalism is higher (and support for liberal norms lower) when illiberal actors are included in mainstream politics (Valentim, 2024a; 2024b).

To understand why citizens in consolidated democracies are turning away from democracy and embracing undemocratic practices, it is necessary to study consolidated democracies. In the current and rapidly evolving context of the United States, it is unclear how the normalization of undemocratic leadership is affecting researcher's ability to develop theories on democratic citizens' support for undemocratic alternatives. With that said, this reinforces the idea of expanding the research agenda in different contexts, particularly consolidated democracies.

### **Researching Without a Clear Operationalization?**

Second, and perhaps most importantly, there are some important conceptual inconsistencies in the definition and measurement of support for undemocratic practices. It should be noted that these problems stem from a relatively recent turn in the study of citizen support for democratic erosion; one which sees researchers focus on *undemocratic practices*. This turn in itself is a step in the right direction considering that the research agenda has mostly been focused on the role of elites and tolerance/support for these political actors and parties. Indeed, until recently, with few exceptions, most studies considered citizens' support for undemocratic politicians rather than support for undemocratic practices, policies, and behaviours. The turn towards measuring and understanding citizen support for undemocratic practices is encouraging, particularly because to build a more thorough understanding of the role of citizens in democratic backsliding it is necessary for the literature to evolve beyond political elites and consider support for undemocratic actions as a whole.

With that said, the recent focus on *undemocratic practices* has not been accompanied by an appropriate conceptual discussion on how to define and measure support for undemocratic practices. Different studies define and operationalize this concept differently, and some do not bother providing a clear definition at all (see Druckman, 2023). This is problematic for a variety

of reasons, particularly because inconsistencies in the measurement of a concept across studies can blur the lines of theoretical development and lead to “wrong turns” in the research agenda. Alternatively, and more pressing, the absence of a clear conceptualization can create some concerns with internal validity. For example, research on the role of partisan misperceptions on support for undemocratic practices overwhelmingly operationalize undemocratic practices as actions targeting the “other side.” (Braley et al., 2023) When evaluating the impact of partisan polarization on an outcome, it is perhaps not ideal to measure the outcome using a measure inherently partisan in nature. This makes these studies provide evidence that partisan misperceptions fuel support only for a very specific type of undemocratic practices, that is actions targeting opposing partisans.

It is therefore necessary for the literature to focus on a broader and more all-encompassing conceptualization and measurement of public support for undemocratic practices. Existing works provide excellent definitions of the concept itself, but often the measurements developed to measure this concept fails to represent the proposed definition. For the purpose of this dissertation, we will define undemocratic practices as “violations of key democratic principles, including [but not necessarily limited to] electoral fairness, checks and balances, and civil liberties” (Graham and Svulik, 2020). The next chapter will delve deeper into how this concept, as defined, is operationalized and measured in this study.

The conceptual shortcoming highlighted above, coupled with the narrow geographic scope of research, has led to the development of a literature where we do not know for sure to what extent theoretical mechanisms apply more generally and for which kind of undemocratic practices. It is the objective of this dissertation to expand the research to three new contexts and to do so with a broader, clearer conceptualization and measurement. To do so, I focus on three theoretical

mechanisms that have been proposed in existing works. In the following section, I propose a theoretical overview of these three perspectives and explain how the shortcomings identified above apply to each strand of research.

## **The Undemocratic Triad: Partisanship, Democratic Trade-Offs, and Age**

The idea behind this dissertation is to examine the puzzle of increasing support for undemocratic practices from three of the most important theoretical approaches while addressing two broader shortcomings of the research agenda. In doing so, I contribute to three distinct literatures which share a dependent variable and also contribute to the development of the research agenda more generally. I focus on the three following approaches respectively: partisan misperceptions, democratic trade-offs, and age. These were selected as the primary perspectives for this dissertation due to their perceived importance in the literature, but also because of clear shortcomings and gaps identified in their application (see above). In this section, I provide a general overview of the three main theoretical perspectives used in the articles of this dissertation and discuss how the shortcomings identified above apply to each. I do so while leaving the more specific details of the individual frameworks to the research articles themselves.

### **Partisan Misperceptions and Support for Undemocratic Practices**

The first theoretical perspective considers the role of partisan identity and partisan-based misperceptions in driving support for undemocratic practices. This approach combines notions from social identity theory and partisanship to examine how group-based biases and mental shortcuts influence people's tendency to assign negative intentions to members of rival political groups. Research on this perspective reveal that strong attachments to one's political group can

foster biased perceptions, making individuals perceive the ideological gap between themselves and their opponents as larger than it really is (Lees & Cikara, 2020; Ruggeri et al., 2021).

In the context of democratic erosion, it is argued that perceptual biases rooted in political identity play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of democratic mutual deterrence and driving support for undemocratic practices. Drawing from insights in intergroup psychology, scholars such as Pasek et al. (2022) and Braley et al. (2023) suggest that the concept of mutual deterrence must be examined in the context of how citizens perceive members of opposing political groups. In this framework, the idea of democratic mutual deterrence resembles a “prisoner's dilemma” scenario: the stability of democracy hinges on the cooperation of all political actors. If one side violates democratic principles to alter the political playing field in their favor, it undermines the ability of others to fairly compete for representation. In response, political opponents, fearing an unfair advantage, may resort to similar tactics, leading to a cycle where democratic norms are increasingly disregarded. This process accelerates democratic erosion.

Bringing together the concept of mutual deterrence and advancements in social identity theory, Pasek et al. (2022) argues that the stability of democratic mutual deterrence is not only compromised when opposing political actors directly breach democratic norms, but also when citizens perceive that their rivals are not committed to these norms. Even the mere belief that the other side is willing to disregard democratic principles can trigger a breakdown in mutual deterrence, further contributing to the destabilization of democratic systems. The theoretical argument is therefore one rooted in partisan identity. In competitive contexts, partisans may develop misperceptions of opposing partisans' commitment to democracy. Such biased perceptions disturb the equilibrium of democratic mutual deterrence and lead partisans to support undemocratic practices to maintain the level-playing field.

This approach is clear and straightforward in theory, and empirical evidence from the United States support it in practice (see Braley et al., 2023). However, little is known about the conditions under which this theoretical perspective can flourish in the real world. Is this “democratic subversion dilemma” —as Braley et al. (2023) name it—limited to hyperpolarized environments such as the United States? Does it only apply to undemocratic practices targeting opposing partisans? The existing research agenda on this approach do not answer these questions. Evidence in support of this theory can only be found in the United States, and the conceptualization of “undemocratic practices” is often narrow, focusing on actions aimed at opponents. The first article in this dissertation seeks to answer these questions by testing the framework in three multiparty Westminster democracies with moderate levels of polarization. The article also includes a broader, more complete conceptualization of undemocratic practices.

### **Democratic Trade-Offs: Is it Really “The Economy and Crime, Stupid”?**

The second important perspective examined in this dissertation is the notion of democratic trade-offs, more specifically those relating to material and physical security (i.e., the economy and crime). Recent studies argue that while citizens may support democracy in theory, their ability to prove this support *in practice* is limited by other factors and conditions that can take precedence over their democratic convictions, essentially making them “democrats in name only” (Wuttke et al., 2022, p. 416). The democratic trade-off hypothesis emerges from this strand of research as a unique development, arguing that citizens may seek to prioritize their political, economic, and social interests at the expense of certain democratic principles.

Research supports this perspective. A study by Cianetti and Hanley (2021) identifies a global trend of democratic backsliding where citizens, disillusioned by economic instability and perceived governmental inefficacy, become more susceptible to authoritarian appeals. The works

of Adserà et al. (2023) and Neundorf et al. (2024) also provide important developments in understanding why citizens may turn their backs on democracy in support of authoritarian alternatives. They demonstrate that while citizens place significant importance on democracy, many may be willing to trade democratic institutions and political rights for better economic and social outcomes, including financial prosperity and physical security (Adserà et al., 2023; Neundorf et al., 2024).

However, while these contributions are critical, they leave room for expansion. Specifically, existing studies tend to treat democracy as a monolithic concept, broadly defined as free elections and fundamental rights. This approach overlooks the multidimensional nature of democracy, which encompasses a range of interconnected institutions, practices, policies, and norms. From judicial independence and legislative accountability to civil liberties and media freedom, each dimension of democracy can be targeted selectively by authoritarian forces. Furthermore, existing research primarily focus on aggregate trends or general trade-offs, neglecting the specificity of democratic backsliding as a process that unfolds through particular mechanisms and affects distinct democratic dimensions differently.

The second article of this dissertation therefore seeks to address these limitations by investigating how citizens' support for the erosion of democracy varies across different dimensions. The core argument is that individuals might selectively tolerate authoritarian alternatives because they place different values on specific democratic components (Chu et al., 2024; Kaftan & Gessler, 2024). In the context of trade-offs for better economic and physical security, I propose that the likelihood of sacrificing a democratic attribute diminishes proportionally to the importance and utility the citizen assigns to it. Consequently, I hypothesize that citizens' willingness to embrace authoritarian alternatives varies across different democratic

dimensions, with resistance expected to be stronger for those dimensions deemed foundational, namely elections and individual civil rights such as freedom of expression.

### **Young People and the Democratic Disconnect**

The third, and final, perspective examines the relationship between age and democratic values. More specifically, this approach suggests that young people might be leaning away from democratic norms. The question of declining democratic support among younger versus older generations is the source of great debate, especially given the rise of illiberalism worldwide. Foa and Mounk (2019) argue that youth are becoming disillusioned with the democratic system and are vulnerable to anti-democratic trends. This aligns with findings by Claassen and Magalhães (2023) showing a generational drop in democratic backing in the United States, not balanced by age-related shifts in attitude.

Understanding these generational differences is vital, particularly concerning how critical views among youth might contribute to democratic decline. While past research (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 1999) suggested that citizens critical of democratic performance could actually bolster democracy by driving reform, the current situation raises doubts. As Norris (2011) points out, even those critical often still hold democracy as an ideal, despite skepticism about its real-world function. This leads to a critical threshold question: at what point do disillusionment and cynicism actively undermine democratic ideals and encourage undemocratic practices?

To validate this concern, it is necessary to observe a trend where younger people not only view democracy more negatively but also show increased tolerance or support for non-democratic options, indicating a move away from established liberal democratic norms. Some recent experimental studies back this, such as Frederiksen (2024), who found younger individuals are more permissive of undemocratic behavior. Conversely, research by Huttunen and Saikkonen

(2023) in Finland suggests younger generations there do not necessarily tolerate undemocratic actions more than older ones. While this challenges the “antipathic youth” theory, the study’s scope is geographically limited to Finland and methodologically narrow. By expanding the geographical scope of research and using a wider operationalization of undemocratic practices, this thesis will directly investigate whether younger citizens are actively shifting towards democratic subversion, and if so, whether this shift is consistent across many several types of undemocratic practices.

In this final article, I argue that there indeed is an undemocratic shift among younger citizens. Relying on developments across various political science literatures, I make the case that a cycle of underrepresentation, economic and social crises, as well as a wave of populist ideals is pushing younger people away from democracy. Most notably, I hypothesize that younger citizens are both less supportive of democracy and explicitly more tolerant of a number of undemocratic practices, linking the previously theorized democratic disconnect to an active undemocratic shift.

## **Summary**

In summary, this dissertation aims to explain why ordinary citizens sometimes support undemocratic practices by contributing to three different theoretical perspectives and addressing broader structural shortcomings identified in the research agenda. I do so in a varied sample of contemporary democracies. This thesis therefore places itself among a growing literature seeking to shine a light on democratic instability and prevent a “downwards spiral of democratic practice.” (Pasek et al., 2022, p. 2) As growing scholarly works demonstrate, democracies no longer die quickly at the hands of elites, rather they die slow and long deaths at the hands of their citizens (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This dissertation is a step forward in understanding the role of citizens

in democratic backsliding, and hopefully, the development of interventions to increase the robustness of democratic systems.

Above all, this dissertation remedies two important limitations in the literature on public support for undemocratic practices, namely the inconsistent conceptualization of the concept of undemocratic practices as well as the lack of attention for context-dependency. As the review of the literature demonstrates, existing works focus overwhelmingly on the hyperpolarized case of the United States. Even when studying other countries, scholars rarely discuss the relevance of country context within the theoretical perspective. This has led to a research agenda which can seldom distinguish between universal theoretical insights and context-dependent causal mechanisms. Similarly, inconsistencies have arose in the definition and conceptualization of undemocratic practices, with some works providing clear definitions with specific and unrelated operationalizations. These two concerns, namely context and concept, are at the core of this dissertation.

Beyond the two general contributions mentioned above, each article makes its own specific contributions. The first article sheds important light on the role of context in moderating the role of partisan animosity and polarization in shaping public support for undemocratic practices. The second article refines the democratic trade-off theory by acknowledging and demonstrating the importance of a multidimensional view of democracy and citizen's differential preferences for distinct dimensions. Lastly, the third article clarifies existing theoretical accounts and reconciles the notion of a democratic disconnect among younger citizens and a growing undemocratic shift among this same demographic group. Altogether, this dissertation makes several contributions at varying levels, from more general and systematic literature-wide developments to more specific and theoretical-perspective dependent advances. Overall, these insights all benefit the

development of our understanding of a straightforward yet complex question: why do citizens support undemocratic practices?

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## Chapter 3: Methodology

The choice of a methodological approach is an important one, particularly when studying the attitudes and behaviours of individuals. In this dissertation, I rely on two complementary approaches: observational and experimental. This section will briefly present the two and how these have been applied to this project. I outline the design of the survey questionnaire and experiment as well as provide details on data collection process. I will also elaborate on other methodological considerations directly related to the objectives of this dissertation, namely case selection and conceptualization. Article-specific details such as analytical strategy and specific variable operationalization (apart from the main dependent variable) will be presented in each respective article.

Before diving into the methodology, I wish to note that the research in this dissertation was approved by the University of Ottawa's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board (Project #S-09-24-10057). The approval letter is presented in the supplementary information of this dissertation. Moreover, the second article of this dissertation (democratic trade-offs) was preregistered on the Open-Science Framework (OSF). This was done to achieve greater transparency in the research design and hypotheses for the conjoint experiment on democratic trade-offs, in line with established practices in open science (see Logg and Dorison, 2021). More information on the pre-registration can be found in the article itself or on the Open Science Framework project page: <https://osf.io/vmbr9/>

## Multi-Method Approach

As mentioned above, the articles in this dissertation rely on a combination of observational and experimental data. More specifically, the three articles analyze data from an original online survey and a conjoint experiment. This multi-method approach allows for an article which leverages the versatility of observational survey data to understand partisan misperceptions, another article which focuses on the conjoint experiment to investigate democratic trade-offs, and finally an article which uses both survey and experimental data to decipher the role of age in explaining support for undemocratic practices. The third article also relies on data from a large-scale online survey conducted in the United States during the 2024 US Election, namely the Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS;  $N = 17,707$ ).<sup>2</sup>

Data from the original survey (conducted in Australia, Canada, and UK) was collected between 28 November and 4 December 2024. Overall, 3,329 respondents were recruited from a Qualtrics online panel. Of these, 52 did not consent, 208 were not eligible because of citizenship status, 12 did not complete the survey, and 24 failed the attention check (see Kam and Meyer, 2015). This leaves us with a sample of 3,033 respondents. Each country had its own version of the survey to allow partisanship-specific questions. With that said, all country-invariant questions were identical across cases and the questions which changed between the countries maintained the same structure and meaning. Moreover, the surveys were launched simultaneously, and data collection took place over the same time period. This way, any period-specific events of global importance which may have occurred during data collection would have the same or similar effects across the three countries.

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<sup>2</sup> Data from the 2024 ELTS was collected in collaboration with Dr. Rory Truex (Princeton University) and Prof Kevin Arceneaux (Sciences Po) thanks to funding awarded to Dr. Rory Truex. The ELTS was approved by the Princeton University Institutional Review Board.

The online survey questionnaire was divided into five sections: the introduction, the psychological construct block, the partisan perception block, the support for undemocratic practices block, and the conclusion. The introduction presented the topic of the survey, obtained informed consent from respondents, and collected the sociodemographic details of respondents.

The conjoint experiment was embedded in the online survey and presented after the questionnaire. This paired-profile conjoint experiment exposed respondents to three pairs of hypothetical societies and tasked them with deciding which they would prefer to live in as well as rating each individual society (3 x 2 design). The profiles randomly vary along seven attributes: elections, free speech, media freedom, checks on the executive, political accountability, economic performance, and crime rate. In this context, a conjoint experiment allows me to simultaneously assess the relative importance of the included components (Bansak et al., 2021). It therefore mimics, in an online and sterile environment, real-world decision-making processes. The primary objective of such an experiment is to evaluate how each attribute impacts the likelihood of a profile being preferred, both individually and in interaction with other factors. More details on how these effects are measured are presented in the concerned articles.

## **Case Selection**

One of the main objectives of this dissertation is to improve the external validity of existing theoretical mechanisms by extending the comparative scope of research. I seek to achieve this by focusing on three of the most similar consolidated democracies around the world: Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Apart from their shared colonial history, these countries share numerous institutional and cultural similarities, making them unique cases to test the

generalizability of various theoretical approaches to understand citizen support for undemocratic practices.

As mentioned, these countries represent unique democratic systems with similar party systems and political cultures rooted in an Anglophone, common-law tradition. They consistently cluster together on global indices like the World Values Survey on key cultural metrics, distinguishing them from many continental European systems. All three cases can also be characterized as moderately polarized; that is, while not immune to partisan acrimony, they have largely lacked the deep affective polarization and inter-party animosity seen in the contemporary United States. Furthermore, while all three have faced significant populist challenges (e.g., the UK's Brexit movement, Canada's People's Party, or Australia's One Nation), none have seen a populist party or leader institutionalize at the executive level in the same manner. This distinction is methodologically useful, allowing a test of whether theories travel to contexts where populism remains a potent but (thus far) legislatively-focused or movement-based force. While they share many similarities, they also have certain differences. Australia, for instance, stands out as a parliamentary federal system with a unique mix of instant runoff voting (IRV) and proportional representation. Canada, meanwhile, shares the parliamentary federal structure of Australia, but has a majoritarian first-past-the-post voting system. As for the United Kingdom, it also has a first-past-the-post electoral system but does not have a federal structure. These small nuances between the three cases, coupled with the overwhelming similarities, make it easier for this research to identify the external validity of recent theoretical insights in the study of support for undemocratic practices.

Furthermore, grounding this research in these three cases is particularly timely, as each has recently faced unique challenges to its democratic norms, providing fertile ground for examining

citizen attitudes. The United Kingdom is still navigating the deep institutional and constitutional rifts opened by Brexit, including high-profile clashes over parliamentary sovereignty and judicial independence (e.g., the 2019 prorogation of Parliament). Canada recently experienced the “Freedom Convoy” protests, which brought questions of democratic expression, the rule of law, and the limits of emergency powers to the forefront of public debate. Australia has contended with its own crises of institutional integrity, such as the “Robo-debt” scandal, which raised profound questions about bureaucratic overreach, ministerial responsibility, and the rule of law, leading to a Royal Commission. These distinct, country-specific events provide a rich and varied backdrop against which to test the generalizability of theories on democratic support.

Approaching this research with three similar cases will be useful to understand whether the three theoretical mechanisms under study are transferable between similar cases. If country-level differences are identified between our cases, this would be indicative of the most sensitive mechanisms that are likely to be highly context-dependent. Such insights would be beneficial in drawing the future of the literature and identifying which theoretical mechanisms may be context-dependent and which may be more universally applicable.

Additionally, using three cases that are different from the United States can help us identify whether theoretical advancements developed in the US can be exported abroad. If the United States is the “most-likely” case for testing various mechanisms to explain public support for undemocratic practices, the three countries included in this study could be labelled the second “most-likely” cases. This is not because these countries are necessarily prone to democratic erosion (as perhaps the US has proven to be), but rather because they are the countries which, as fellow Anglophone, post-colonial, and long-standing democracies, share the most similar political culture to the United States. Unlike the traditional multiparty European political system, Australia,

Canada, and the United Kingdom have what we could consider two-party plus systems, where two parties predominate, and smaller parties struggle to emerge from the shadows. In Canada and Australia, for instance, only two political parties—the Conservatives and Liberals in Canada and the Labor and National/Liberals in Australia—have ever won the most seats and formed government. This makes place for greater party identification, and lower levels of partisan volatility. They are also, like the United States, much older democracies than what can be found in Europe today (bar a few exceptions).

The idea behind wanting to test different theoretical perspectives in these three “second most-likely” cases is the notion that if the mechanisms do not generalize to these countries, then this would be a strong indication that the theoretical mechanisms developed and tested in the United States are not appropriate for most other cases as well. In other words, it could be said that the three countries included in this research are where we should most expect theoretical mechanisms developed in the United States to apply. If they do not, then this would be indicative of a need to expand the geographical scope of theory-building and theory-testing in the literature on public support for democratic backsliding.

## **Conceptualizing Undemocratic Practices**

In addition to expanding the comparative scope of the research agenda, this dissertation aims to make a contribution by clarifying the conceptualization and measurement of support for undemocratic practices. One of the main reasons for doing so is to improve the internal validity of research on this topic and understand the potential nuances of public support for different types of undemocratic actions.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, we define the term *undemocratic practices* as “violations of key democratic principles, including [but not necessarily limited to] electoral fairness, checks and balances, and civil liberties” (Graham and Svulik, 2020). This definition is deliberately broad, and there exists a plethora of practices which fall under its boundaries. Several existing works rely on such broad definitions. However, these studies often proceed to a narrow operationalization and measurement of the concept. As an example, Braley et al. (2023) offer a broad definition of support for undemocratic practices, writing that it is the willingness of citizens to support the subversion of democratic norms. In the absence of a narrower, more specific definition, it may be expected that their study will measure a support for the subversion of a wide range of democratic norms or that they would employ one large item measuring support for the subversion of a broad notion of “democratic norms.” However, their study turns to focus on the subversion of partisan-based democratic norms by incorporating the identification of the out-party or opponents within the survey questions.

In a study concerned with the impact of partisan misperceptions on support for undemocratic practices, measuring the dependent variable using cues from the independent variable is certainly cause for concern. The presence of these cues may indeed have primed respondents to report greater support for undemocratic practices because these were specifically targeted at opponents. This is all the more problematic when we understand that the research design had respondents answer the same series of items twice, once thinking about the out-party, and a second time thinking about their own party. As an example, respondents are asked to indicate the extent to which they support the following items to present but a few: “Would you support banning far-[other side] rallies in the state capital?” or “Would you support laws that would make it easier for [own party] to get elected?” In the survey, the fields in bracket were replaced by the value of the

side which respondents selected in the sociodemographic questionnaire (in the study, these were Republican or Democrat as well as Right or Left).

In a different study (see Frederiksen, 2024), similar concerns arise. The four-item measure used to operationalize support for undemocratic practices cues respondents to “opposing parties” or “political opponents.” While not as explicit as embedding the name of the out-party, this still acts as a cue for those answering the survey. Moreover, three of the four items included such a cue, with only the fourth item—on press independence—not explicitly referring to a political group. The inclusion of political identity priming is common across many other works as well, including but not limited to Druckman (2023), Graham and Svobik (2020) and Saikkonen and Christensen (2023). These examples demonstrate a concerning trend in studies investigating support for undemocratic practices: that is, there is an important lack of consideration for how we measure this support and the potential nuances that different specific undemocratic practices may present. Indeed, it appears completely logical that individuals may support the subversion of some democratic norms and institutions but not others. Accordingly, it is necessary for research to consider the multidimensionality of this concept by providing a broader definition and measuring support for a wider range of specific undemocratic practices.

In line with this evidence, I propose such a conceptualization and operationalization here. To measure support for the broad concept of undemocratic practices, I consider support for individual actions which all fall within the scope of democratic norm transgressions. So as not to produce an interminable list of undemocratic practices, I focus on measuring support for transgressions that affect specific norms or principles considered central to democracy. These principles stem from Dahl’s (1971; 1989) exhaustive work on democratic theory as well as a plethora of existing research on support for democratic principles (see Kingzette et al., 2014; Norris, 1999; 2011). As

such, I measure support for undemocratic practices that affect the following twelve norms and/or principles: irreversibility of elections, political violence, free and fair elections, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, rule of law, universal right to vote, political accountability, judicial independence, right to run for public office, media independence, and freedom of assembly. While this list may not be exhaustive, it virtually constitutes the most thorough operationalization of support for undemocratic practices. In the first and third articles of this dissertation, the twelve items listed in Table 1 are used to measure the main dependent variable.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1.** Operationalization of support for undemocratic practices or democratic norm violations

<b>Undemocratic practice or democratic norm violated</b>	<b>Survey item</b>
Irreversibility of elections	I think it is necessary sometimes to reverse the results of elections that the wrong candidate seems to have won.
Political violence	I support the use of force to prevent policies I disagree with from being enacted.
Voter fraud / Free and fair elections	It is sometimes necessary to forge ballots to ensure the correct political candidate wins.
Freedom of expression	Some political candidates should be banned from social media.
Freedom of assembly	I would support legislation that limits the ability of some politicians to hold political rallies.
Rule of law	The government should be able to bend the law to solve pressing issues.
Voter suppression / Right to vote	I think it is necessary to pass laws that make it harder for some people to vote.
Political accountability	Politicians who have a majority of support should be protected from criminal prosecution.
Judicial independence	A prime minister should not be bound by court decisions they believe are politicized.
Right to run for office	Some people should be banned from running for public office regardless of how popular they are.
Media independence / control	Some media organizations should be forced to close down because of their bias and insincerity.
Freedom of speech / assembly	The government should have the power to ban organizations that promote subversive values.

This more expansive operationalization is conceptually more sound for several reasons. Most importantly, it makes place for the analysis of differences in support for distinct undemocratic

<sup>3</sup> The second article presents the results of a conjoint experiment and does not rely on cross-sectional data. As such, it does not rely on the measure operationalized here. With that said, this article still makes a contribution related to the conceptualization of the terms democratic and undemocratic (see Chapter 5).

practices. This is a crucial addition in the study of all theoretical perspectives, including those studied here. In the context of democratic trade-offs, for instance, adopting a more multidimensional operationalization allows for theoretical insights in understanding how citizens would be willing to trade different dimensions of democracy (i.e., tolerate the erosion of different norms or institutions). Similarly, in the study of partisan polarization and misperceptions, a multidimensional approach can help us understand the dynamics of support for different types of undemocratic practices, and whether partisan misperceptions fuel all types of such actions similarly.

Another benefit of this operationalization rests in the practical implications of measuring support for a broad range of undemocratic practices. Indeed, unlike measures that focus on specific partisan-cued attacks, this operationalization can provide clear insights into where specifically citizens are more (and least) likely to allow democratic erosion to take place. From a demand side perspective, this is akin to understanding where the “demand” for undemocratic practices (or democratic erosion) is exactly. For these reasons, the proposed operationalization is conceptually better than currently available alternatives, and scholars are encouraged to leverage such an approach in future research.

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## **Chapter 4: Do Partisan Misperceptions Fuel Support for Undemocratic Practices?**

### **Abstract**

The recent rise in partisan polarization and democratic backsliding around the world has contributed to a rapidly growing research agenda on the relationship between partisan animosity and citizen support for undemocratic practices. Existing studies point to a worrying trend whereas partisans develop biased views of out-partisans' commitment to democracy and respond by increasingly supporting undemocratic practices. The present study expands this research agenda by testing the democratic subversion framework outside the typical American case and with an expanded conceptualization of undemocratic practices. Relying on original survey data from Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom ( $N = 3,033$ ), I find that misperceptions of out-partisans' commitment to democracy do not substantively explain citizen support for democratic subversion in these three contexts. These results are fairly inconsistent across different types of undemocratic practices. The implications of these findings are discussed.

## Introduction

For much of the 20th century, conventional wisdom held that democracies collapsed primarily due to the actions of power-hungry elites or as a result of external shocks, such as military conflicts or coups (Marinov & Goemans, 2014; Peic & Reiter, 2011). However, recent scholarship suggests that democratic breakdowns now unfold through a gradual process of deconsolidation rather than abrupt regime change (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Indeed, the death of liberal democracies is often marked by incremental erosion and the slow chipping away of democratic norms and institutions. Studies of democratic backsliding reveal that this gradual decline frequently manifests as civic disengagement, weakening adherence to democratic norms, and rising public support for undemocratic practices (Armaly & Enders, 2024; Frederiksen & Skaaning, 2023).

Aligned with this shift, a growing body of literature now scrutinizes the role of ordinary citizens as active or passive enablers of democratic erosion (Goodman, 2022). Previously, research largely overlooked the role of citizens in democratic breakdowns, focusing instead on the actions of elites and structural vulnerabilities. Yet, in an era where popular support can be a powerful force for democratic stability or decline, understanding why citizens might endorse or tolerate undemocratic measures has become a crucial question. Central to this inquiry is therefore an exploration of the motivations behind citizen support for practices that undermine democracy.

One significant factor emerging from this line of research is partisan identity. Recent studies illustrate how partisan loyalty can shape attitudes toward democratic principles, particularly when partisan identities intensify through affective polarization. For instance, research by Gidengil et al. (2022) demonstrates that many partisans in the United States and Canada are willing to compromise on executive constraints to advance ideological goals. This pattern is echoed in a growing comparative literature, which demonstrates how partisan allegiances can influence

citizens' willingness to weaken democratic checks and balances (Gessler & Wunsch, 2023; Graham & Svobik, 2020; Orhan, 2022).

Building on these findings, recent scholarship argues that the erosion of democratic norms among citizens can be attributed, in part, to exaggerated perceptions of political opponents' disregard for democracy and the rule of law (Braley et al., 2023; Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Pasek et al., 2022). Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the emerging concept of political sectarianism (Finkel et al., 2020), this research posits that individuals may rationalize undemocratic actions as necessary defenses against perceived threats from political opponents. Thus, even citizens who value democratic principles may come to support anti-democratic measures when they believe such actions are essential to protect democracy from adversaries they perceive as dangerous (Braley et al., 2023; Pasek et al., 2022).

In this article, I expand this research agenda by testing the democratic subversion framework outside the typical American case and with an expanded conceptualization of undemocratic practices. In doing so, this research makes two substantial contributions to the literature. First, it provides a robust evaluation of the democratic subversion hypothesis in three highly democratic and moderately polarized settings (i.e., Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom), moving beyond the focus of previous research on the hyperpolarized context of the United States. Second, it expands the conceptual definition and measurement of undemocratic practices to include a wide range of norm-defying policies and behaviours that are not limited to attacks against out-partisans. This reframing is crucial as it shines a light on the nuanced ways in which democratic backsliding can be fueled by citizens in increasingly polarized societies. It helps demonstrate which types of undemocratic actions citizens support due to partisan misperceptions.

## **Partisan identity and support for undemocratic practices**

Initially developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), social identity theory argues that individuals derive a portion of their self-concept from their membership in social groups. In political psychology, the theory has proven useful to understand how identification to political groups can influence individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours (Huddy, 2001). Partisanship — as the most widespread form of political identity in contemporary democracies — has been widely studied through the lens of social identity theory, especially with regards to inter-party hostility and affective polarization (Greene, 1999; West & Iyengar, 2022).

Bringing together elements of social identity theory and the concept of mutual deterrence, scholars have begun investigating how group-based heuristics and biases can drive citizens' attribution of negative beliefs to members of opposing political factions. Indeed, studies highlight the role of negative biases connected to individuals' attachments to political groups in creating asymmetrical perceptions in which individuals inflate the ideological differences between their political opponents and themselves (Lees & Cikara, 2020; Ruggeri et al., 2021). For instance, recent work on affective partisanship demonstrates that individuals misattribute their political in-group's motives as being driven by love and their out-group's motives as being driven by hate (Amira et al., 2021). In the United States, partisans also tend to hold negatively biased meta-perceptions, which indicates that they believe that members of the out-group dislike them much more than they actually do (Lees & Cikara, 2020; Moore-Berg et al., 2020).

It should be noted that these heuristic biases function through both in-group positivity and out-group negativity, meaning that individuals engage in self-reinforcing reasoning whereas they positively misestimate the in-group and negatively misestimate the outgroup. In other words, individuals' perceptions of their own party are as important as their perceptions of other parties.

In their recent study on partisan perceptions, Braley et al. (2023) experimentally demonstrate the presence of positive and negative biases, the former in the evaluation of co-partisans and the latter in the evaluation of out-partisans (i.e., political opponents). Together, these positive and negative biases reinforce asymmetrical perceptions of in- and out-groups (Lees & Cikara, 2020).

Perceptual biases driven by political identity directly influence the balance of democratic mutual deterrence. Building on the intergroup psychology developments discussed above, scholars including Pasek et al. (2022) and Braley et al. (2023) argue that mutual deterrence should be considered alongside citizen's perceptions of opposing partisans. In this instance, the logic of democratic mutual deterrence can be understood as a sort of prisoner's dilemma: the positive outcome (i.e., a stable democracy) is contingent upon the cooperation of all parties; if a political actor subverts the rules of democracy to shift the odds of winning in their favour, it affects the ability of other actors to seek and obtain representation. The logical response from opponents in this case is therefore to subvert democratic norms in order to remain competitive. In turn, these behaviours create a self-fulfilling cycle of democratic backsliding. Moreover, Pasek et al. (2015) argue that democratic mutual deterrence can be destabilized not only when opposing partisans *practically* infringe democratic norms and conventions, but also crucially when citizens simply *perceive* that opposing partisans are not committed to democratic norms.

Beyond understanding the dynamics of intergroup perceptions in the political arena, scholars have also begun investigating the potential impacts of biased perceptions on citizens' attitudes and behaviours (Ruggeri et al., 2021). Recent works have indeed established the crucial role of perceptions in driving several political behaviours. In the United States, for instance, negatively biased perceptions of out-partisans are related to dehumanization (Martherus et al., 2021), intergroup hostility (Moore-Berg et al., 2020), and political violence (Mernyk et al., 2022). Biased

out-group attributions have also been associated to perceptions of election meddling (Beaulieu, 2014; Bordeleau, 2022) and greater support for restricting access to voting (Perry et al., 2022). In fact, recent survey studies suggest that perceptions of electoral integrity are directly related to voters' affect towards the winning party, which are biased either positively or negatively depending on whether a person identifies with the winning or losing party (Goldman et al., 2024).

Partisan misperceptions can also contribute to issue-based polarization. Indeed, research consistently shows that Democrats and Republicans overestimate their ideological differences on several key political issues (McCoy & Somer, 2019). In turn, this polarization can lead to increased political activism (Huddy et al., 2015). Overall, these biases generalize to all sorts of partisan conflicts and can culminate in partisan violence (Mernyk et al., 2022). In fact, researchers have demonstrated that the gap in perceptions between in-partisans' and out-partisans' support for democratic norms is strongly associated with their desire to harm the other party (Mernyk et al., 2022). This is true despite individuals' awareness that such actions will come at the expense of the rule of law and the principles of democracy.

These developments clearly demonstrate that citizens rely on their biased perceptions of political opponents to justify their own (or their group's) negative attitudes and behaviours (Braley et al., 2023; Pasek et al., 2022). In other words, it is not simply about what political opponents are doing, but also about what individuals believe their opponents are doing or thinking. Based on these developments, Braley et al. (2023) posited that misperceptions may be useful to explain why citizens who are otherwise committed to democracy sometimes support policies and behaviours which are deemed undemocratic. This mechanism, coined as the *subversion dilemma*, can be understood through the hereunder theoretical axiom:

*Individuals who perceive that opposing partisans are not committed to democratic norms—whether these perceptions are warranted or not—may support undemocratic*

*policies and behaviours in order to check their opponent's transgressions.*

This mechanism is rooted directly in the previously discussed literature on political identity and intergroup perceptions. This perspective theorizes that partisans will respond to perceptions of democratic transgressions by opponents by themselves supporting undemocratic options. Indeed, individuals' biased perceptions of opponents may destabilize democratic mutual deterrence (Braley et al., 2023; Pasek et al., 2022). As a consequence, citizens are likely to believe that the only way to compete for power and save democracy from their opponents is for them to also engage in undemocratic behaviours.

The subversion dilemma therefore argues that regardless of citizens commitment to democratic principles, they may be prone to supporting undemocratic policies and behaviours if they consider that these principles are only normative within their own political group. By supporting such undemocratic behaviours (which they think is justified), individuals who hold negatively biased perceptions reinforce their opponents' perception that they do not value democratic principles which may in turn lead to a mutually-reinforcing downward spiral of democratic practice (Pasek et al., 2022). This perspective has been tested and confirmed across many studies, but as we will see, the conceptualization of support for democratic subversion in these works remains narrow.

## **This research**

In the present research, I seek to build on the recent developments outlined above and expand the literature on partisan misperceptions and public support for democratic subversion. To do so, I test the democratic subversion framework outside the typical American case and with an expanded conceptualization of undemocratic practices. The decision to focus on testing the framework

outside the US and with an expanded conceptualization of undemocratic practices stem from several reasons.

First, the prevailing focus on the United States as a primary case study has led to the adoption of a framework that may not be replicable or relevant in multiparty or less polarized settings. The U.S. context, marked by its two-party system and highly (bi)polarized political landscape, offers a distinctive yet limited perspective on the role of partisanship in undermining democratic values. This focus risks generating conclusions that are both US-centric and potentially misleading when applied to other democratic settings, where support for undemocratic practices may arise in different forms or be motivated by factors beyond partisan rivalry. This is not to say that studying the role of partisanship in democratic backsliding in the US is not important, but we must acknowledge that making universal theoretical conclusions from US-centric analyses is dangerous. As such, it is crucial to look beyond the United States and understand to what extent partisan misperceptions can explain increased support for undemocratic practices in multiparty and moderately polarized settings.

Another important aspect of existing research lies in the narrow conceptualization of what constitutes undemocratic practices (see Table 4.1 for a selective overview). Indeed, current studies tend to define undemocratic actions predominantly as measures aimed at restricting or disadvantaging opposing partisans, thus overlooking a wider spectrum of anti-democratic behaviors that may not be explicitly partisan in nature. This narrow framing may skew our understanding by implying that threats to democratic norms are exclusively driven by inter-party animosity. However, undemocratic practices can emerge in contexts beyond explicit partisan targeting, such as through support for institutional changes or erosion of rights that affect society more broadly, transcending immediate partisan conflicts. While it may be useful to test a novel

theoretical perspective using a narrow and specific conceptualization, it is a natural evolution of research to expand conceptualizations.

### **(Re)-Conceptualizing undemocratic practices**

To develop a more comprehensive understanding of undemocratic practices, it is essential to move beyond the narrow focus on actions targeting opposing partisans. I propose here a broader conceptualization that encompasses a range of behaviors and institutional changes that undermine democratic norms and institutions, regardless of partisan agency. By broadening the scope of this concept, we can recognize the multifaceted nature of democratic erosion and capture how various actors, including elected officials, bureaucracies, and interest groups, may contribute to the gradual decline of democratic governance.

Undemocratic practices should be understood as transgressions of the conventions of liberal democracy, including competitive elections, the rule of law, and the protection of fundamental rights (Dahl, 1971; Merkel, 2004). These transgressions manifest in multiple forms, including but not limited to limiting the ability of citizens to participate freely in the political process, weakening independent organizations and agencies tasked with democratic accountability, and altering legal frameworks in ways that disproportionately disadvantage certain groups (O'donnell, 2004). For instance, in early 2020, Poland's ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) imposed severe restrictions on judicial independence, threatening justices and limiting the courts' ability to provide independent rulings (Bernhard, 2021). Experts widely regard this as an attempt to circumvent democratic accountability while simultaneously advancing anti-LGBTQ+ policies and restricting free speech. The Polish case exemplifies a broader pattern in which political actors engage in undemocratic practices to entrench power and weaken institutional checks and balances.

Expanding the conceptual lens further, undemocratic practices include actions such as the

erosion of civil liberties—restrictions on freedom of speech, assembly, and the press—alongside direct interferences in electoral processes, such as gerrymandering, voter suppression, or the strategic undermining of electoral integrity (Schedler, 2002). These manipulations distort political representation and weaken public trust in democratic institutions, thereby creating a cycle of disenfranchisement and disengagement. Furthermore, the centralization of power, often justified through emergency measures or populist rhetoric, frequently results in the marginalization of opposition voices and the circumvention of legislative scrutiny. This concentration of authority, at the expense of the legislative and judicial branches, disrupts the essential balance of power necessary for democratic governance (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

Another critical dimension of undemocratic practices lies in policies that systematically disadvantage minority groups, weakening the inclusivity that underpins democratic societies. Whether through voter ID laws that disproportionately impact marginalized communities, legal constraints on civil society organizations, or policies that inhibit the political participation of immigrants and ethnic minorities, these practices serve to entrench existing power hierarchies and suppress pluralism (Hajnal et al., 2017). The adoption of exclusionary nationalist rhetoric, often coupled with legal and administrative barriers to political participation, further exacerbates democratic backsliding by normalizing the disenfranchisement of certain segments of the population.

As we can see, the term *undemocratic practices* expands far beyond actions targeting opponents. By adopting a broader framework for this concept, this research will be able to identify whether the subversion dilemma mechanism extends to various types of undemocratic actions and if not, which types of undemocratic practices are (and are not) fueled by partisan misperceptions.

**Table 4.1.** Conceptualization and measurement of undemocratic practices in selected existing studies

	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Measurement</b>
Frederiksen (2024)	Violations of the key democratic principles of free and fair elections, civil liberties, and the rule of law.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Supported a proposal to reduce polling stations in areas that support opposing parties.</li> <li>2. Said court rulings by judges appointed by opposing parties should be ignored.</li> <li>3. Said it is legitimate to fight political opponents in the streets if one feels provoked.</li> <li>4. Said it is acceptable to harass journalists that do not reveal sources.</li> </ol>
Braley et al. (2023)	Support for democratic norms, which can be defined as common understandings about when political actors must exercise restraint to uphold democratic institutions.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Would you support banning far-[other side] rallies in the state capital.</li> <li>2. Would you support ignoring controversial rulings by [out party] judges?</li> <li>3. Would you support freezing the social media accounts of [other party] journalists?</li> <li>4. Would you support reducing the number of voting stations in towns that support [out party]?</li> <li>5. Would you support laws that would make it easier for [own party] to get elected?</li> <li>6. Would you support using violence to block major [out party] laws?</li> <li>7. Would you support significantly reinterpreting the Constitution in order to block [out party] policies?</li> </ol>
Druckman (2023)	No definition	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support banning [out-party] group rallies in the state capital.</li> <li>2. Support ignoring controversial court rulings by [out-party] judges.</li> <li>3. Support freezing the social media accounts of [out-party] journalists.</li> <li>4. Support reducing the number of voting stations in towns that support [out-party].</li> <li>5. Support laws that would make it easier for [in-party] to get elected.</li> <li>6. Support using violence to block [out-party] laws.</li> <li>7. Support significantly reinterpreting the Constitution in order to block [other party] policies.</li> </ol>
Graham and Svolik (2020)	Violations of key democratic principles, including electoral fairness, checks and balances, and civil liberties	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Supported a redistricting plan that gives [own party] [2 or 10] extra seats despite a decline in the polls.</li> <li>2. Supported a proposal to reduce the number of polling stations in areas that support [out party].</li> <li>3. Said the [own party] governor should rule by executive order if [out party] legislators don't cooperate.</li> <li>4. Said the [own party] governor should ignore unfavourable court rulings by [out party]-appointed judges.</li> <li>5. Said the [own party] governor should ban far-[left or right] group or rallies in the state capital.</li> <li>6. Said the [own party] governor should prosecute journalists who accuse him of misconduct without revealing sources.</li> </ol>
Saikkonen and Christensen (2023)	Transgressions to the democratic norms of respecting the legitimacy of the political opposition and respecting the separation of powers and rule of law (independence of judiciary)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Supports physical attacks against opposition candidates.</li> <li>2. Judicial decisions do not have to be respected if they may have a negative effect on policies advanced by one's own party.</li> </ol>

## Methodology

The data for this study was collected between 28 November and 4 December 2024. Overall, 3,329 respondents were recruited from a Qualtrics online panel. Of these, 52 did not consent, 208 were not eligible because of citizenship status, 12 did not complete the survey, and 24 failed the attention check.<sup>4</sup> This leaves us with a sample of 3,033 respondents. Table 4.2 presents the sociodemographic composition of the sample at the country-level and pooled. As we can see, the sample is well balanced both within and between countries.

**Table 4.2.** Sample composition (pooled and by country)

	<b>Pooled Sample</b> ( <i>N</i> = 3,033)	<b>Australia</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,005)	<b>Canada</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,002)	<b>United Kingdom</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,026)
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	45.98	46.11	43.84	47.95
Female	54.01	53.89	56.16	52.05
<b>Age</b>				
18-29	20.39	20.92	18.58	21.64
30-49	37.02	36.75	38.46	35.87
50-64	23.59	21.41	27.17	22.22
65+	19.00	20.92	15.78	20.27
<b>Education</b>				
Secondary or less	28.37	31.37	25.27	28.46
University degree	40.75	40.44	44.66	37.23
Higher education	30.88	28.19	30.07	34.31
<b>Ideology</b>				
Left	16.51	16.17	16.08	17.25
Centre	58.04	60.98	56.94	56.24
Right	25.45	22.85	26.97	26.54

*Note:* Entries are percentages. Categories do not necessarily add up to 100% due to missing responses.

## Survey questionnaire and measures

Respondents first answered a sociodemographic questionnaire. This included providing their age, gender, province/region of residence, education level, and household income. In addition to this

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<sup>4</sup> To take part in the survey, respondents had to be citizens of the respective country in which the survey was fielded. Moreover, respondents had to complete an attention check which consisted in selecting the colour from a list.

questionnaire, participants completed several political attitudes measures, including left-right political orientation. The complete details of these measures, including question wording, can be found in the supplementary material.

Upon giving their consent and responding to the sociodemographic questions, respondents were asked to choose the political party they felt closest to. This was captured using the following item: “Do you generally think of yourself as closer to one of the political parties than the others? If yes, which party?” The list of political parties included in the questionnaire is based on the official results from the last national-level election in each country. To be included, a political party had to have obtained at least 2 per cent of the popular vote in that last election or be a party that merits inclusion due to its regional significance (i.e., Bloc Québécois in Canada).

Respondents were then asked to rate each political party on a commitment to democracy scale. This was phrased as follows: “In your opinion, to what extent do you believe each of the following political parties are committed to the principles of democracy.” Answers were measured on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 = *not at all committed to democracy*; and 10 = *fully committed to democracy*. For each respondent, a misperception of out-partisans’ commitment to democracy score was computed by averaging weighted scores on the question above. This weighted index relied on each party’s vote share in the latest national-level election to weigh each out-party score and create a general score of how an individual perceives out-party’s to be committed to democracy (taking into account the relative importance of each party). This weighted index is the optimal measure in multiparty settings like Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom because it considers smaller parties as important players in the party system while controlling for the fact that not all parties are equally important (i.e., perceptions of some parties will matter more due to their larger presence).

Lastly, I measure respondents’ support and tolerance for undemocratic practices using a 12-item questionnaire. Each item represented a specific policy or behaviour which infringed one or many liberal democratic norms. The answers to these items were captured on five-point Likert scales ranging from *strongly disagree* (1), *somewhat disagree* (2), *neither agree nor disagree* (3), *somewhat agree* (4), and *strongly agree* (5). The list of items was developed through a selection and adaptation of various different undemocratic measures used in existing research (including Braley et al., 2023; Druckman, 2023; Graham & Svulik, 2020; Pasek et al., 2022). The aim is to encapsulate actions that affect distinct components of democracy or constitute violations of different democratic norms. When required, the term *prime minister* is used to designate the head of government since the data was collected in constitutional monarchies with prime ministers as heads of governments. The final list of twelve items is presented in Table 4.3.

**Table 4.3.** Items capturing support for undemocratic practices or democratic norm violations

<b>Undemocratic practice or democratic norm violated</b>	<b>Survey item</b>
Irreversibility of elections	I think it is necessary sometimes to reverse the results of elections that the wrong candidate seems to have won.
Political violence	I support the use of force to prevent policies I disagree with from being enacted.
Voter fraud / Free and fair elections	It is sometimes necessary to forge ballots to ensure the correct political candidate wins.
Freedom of expression	Some political candidates should be banned from social media.
Freedom of assembly	I would support legislation that limits the ability of some politicians to hold political rallies.
Rule of law	The government should be able to bend the law to solve pressing issues.
Voter suppression / Right to vote	I think it is necessary to pass laws that make it harder for some people to vote.
Political accountability	Politicians who have a majority of support should be protected from criminal prosecution.
Judicial independence	A prime minister should not be bound by court decisions they believe are politicized.
Right to run for office	Some people should be banned from running for public office regardless of how popular they are.
Media independence / control	Some media organizations should be forced to close down because of their bias and insincerity.
Freedom of speech / assembly	The government should have the power to ban organizations that promote subversive values.

## Results

I begin by examining citizens' perceptions of opposing partisans' commitment to democracy. In other words, are partisan misperceptions identified in previous American research present in the three cases studied here? To do so, I produce density plots which overlap respondents' perceptions of opponents' commitment to democracy and their perceptions of their own party's commitment to democracy. To facilitate the interpretation, I limit these plots to the two primary parties in each of the three countries included.

As we can see from

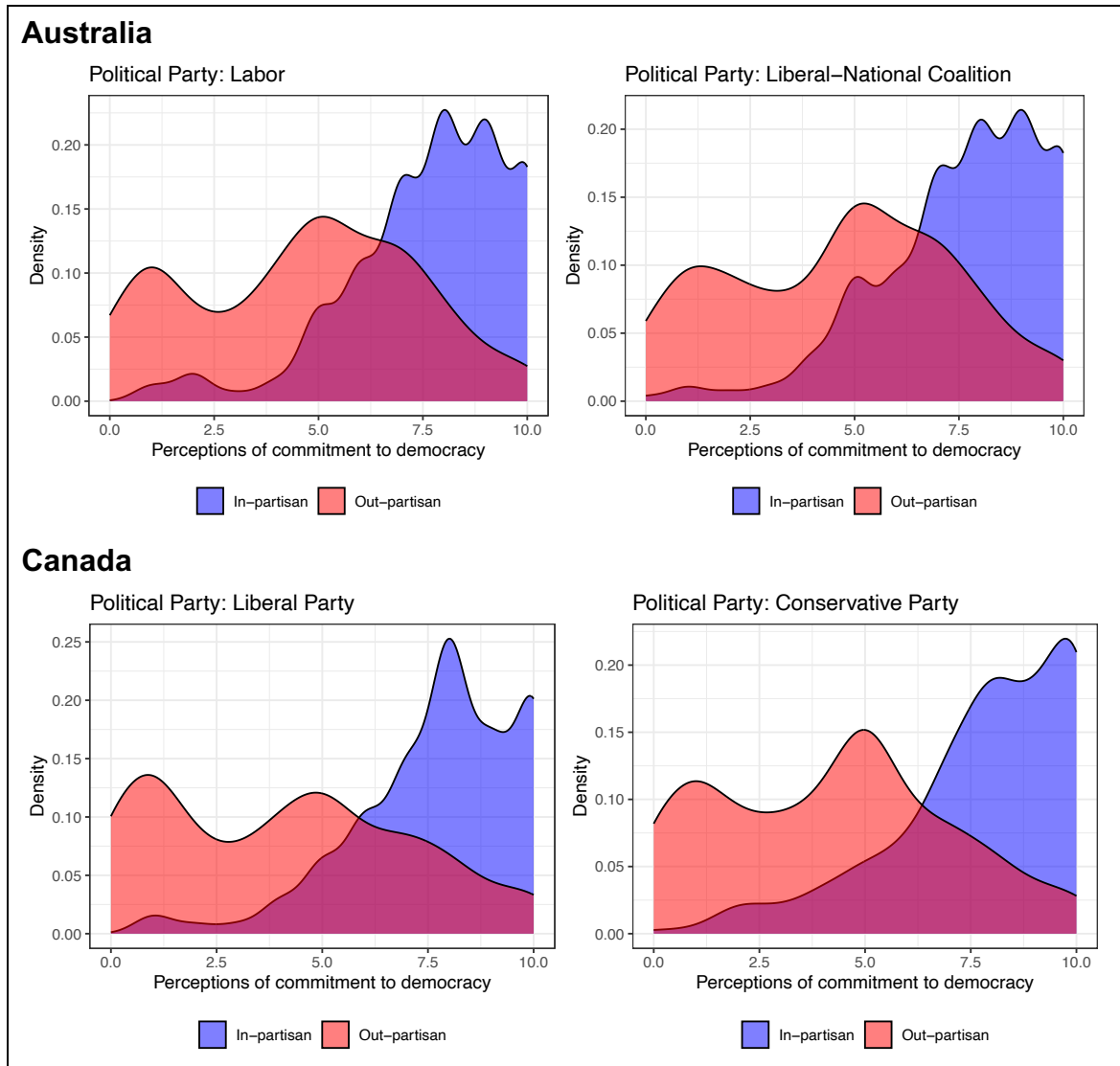
Figure 4.1, there is, in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, an important gap between how people perceive their own party's commitment to democracy and the extent to which they perceive opposing parties' commitment to democracy. In all three cases, we can notice an important gap towards the end of the perception of commitment to democracy scale between out-partisans and in-partisans respectively. This gap represents the foundational premise of the subversion dilemma: that is, people perceive their own party as more committed to democracy than opponents and misperceive opposing parties as less committed to democracy. These misperceptions are rooted in partisan identity and are explained in previous research as stemming from increasing partisan polarization (Pasek et al., 2022).

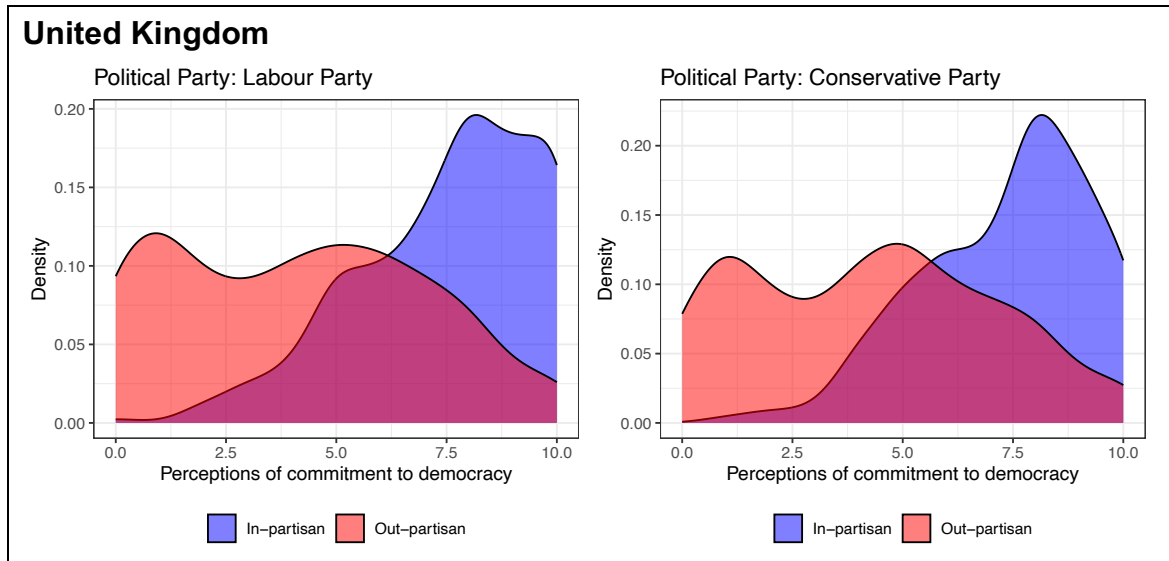
The density plots in

Figure 4.1 therefore support the notion of partisan misperceptions regarding commitment to democracy in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. This is in line with what has been found in previous research conducted in the United States. With that said, this does not mean that these partisan misperceptions have the same implications in terms of support for undemocratic practices in these countries as they do in the United States. It is therefore our task to examine whether such

perceptions carry negative impacts on democratic support in these three cases.

**Figure 4.1.** Perceptions of in- and out-partisans' commitment to democracy





Having established the presence of partisan misperceptions regarding democratic commitment in our three country cases, we now turn to investigating whether these misperceptions fuel support for undemocratic practices as demonstrated in the United States. presents the results of country-level OLS regression models with support for undemocratic practices as the outcome variable (in this model, this is a mean index of all twelve undemocratic items). As we can see, perceptions of opposing partisans' commitment to democracy are only weakly associated to individuals' support for undemocratic practices. While the coefficients are statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level in Australia and the United Kingdom, the coefficients are small and in different directions (positive in Australia and negative in the United Kingdom). Across all three countries the coefficients are small, indicating that partisan misperceptions do not contribute meaningfully to citizens' support for undemocratic policies.

**Table 4.4** presents the results of country-level OLS regression models with support for undemocratic practices as the outcome variable (in this model, this is a mean index of all twelve undemocratic items). As we can see, perceptions of opposing partisans' commitment to democracy are only weakly associated to individuals' support for undemocratic practices. While the

coefficients are statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level in Australia and the United Kingdom, the coefficients are small and in different directions (positive in Australia and negative in the United Kingdom). Across all three countries the coefficients are small, indicating that partisan misperceptions do not contribute meaningfully to citizens' support for undemocratic policies.

**Table 4.4.** OLS regression models of support for undemocratic practices

	Australia	Canada	United Kingdom
(Intercept)	3.488*** (0.140)	3.391*** (0.149)	3.436*** (0.137)
Partisan Misperceptions	0.027* (0.012)	0.013 (0.013)	-0.027* (0.012)
Age	-0.012*** (0.001)	-0.014*** (0.001)	-0.011*** (0.001)
Gender (Female)	0.038 (0.047)	0.090 (0.048)	0.084 (0.044)
Education (Low)	-0.082** (0.030)	0.053 (0.032)	0.057* (0.029)
Party ID	-0.002** (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.002** (0.001)
Economic Insecurity	-0.046 (0.034)	-0.056 (0.036)	-0.029 (0.034)
<i>N</i>	1,003	1,000	1,022
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.088	0.095	0.097
Log Likelihood	0.71	0.74	0.69
RMSE	3.488***	3.391***	3.436***

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

To make sure that the results take into consideration the various partisan identities and sociodemographic profiles which may independently explain support for undemocratic practices, the models controlled for partisan identification, age, gender, education, and economic insecurity. Among these control variables, age stands out as the most important factor in explaining support for undemocratic practices.

In addition to the models above—which rely on an index measure of support for undemocratic practices—I examine whether the results are consistent between different types of undemocratic

practices. To do so, I compute regression models for each of the twelve undemocratic practices measured in the survey. These are also repeated for across the three countries. So as not to overcrowd the manuscript, I will only discuss the results of these models here. The complete regression models are presented in the supplementary material.

In all three countries, we find inconsistent results between different specific undemocratic practices. In Australia, we find a positive relationship between partisan misperceptions and undemocratic practices for the following actions: voter fraud, government can bend laws, voter suppression, leader is above the law, courts should be ignored, and some civil organizations should be banned. Interestingly, the relationships found are in the opposite direction of what has been previously theorized and demonstrated in the United States. In other words, the more citizens perceive opponents as democratic, the more likely they are to support the undemocratic practices mentioned above. These associations are far from substantial, however, and the coefficients indicate overall small and weak relationships. The findings in Canada are similar to that found in Australia, albeit less inconsistent. Only two items seem associated with partisan misperceptions: government can bend laws, and some civil organizations can be banned. However, in this case as well the coefficients are small and reveal non-substantial relationships.

Lastly, the results in the United Kingdom are more aligned with previous research. In this case, we find four items are negatively related with partisan misperceptions, indicating that more negative perceptions of opposing parties' commitment to democracy are related to increased support for these undemocratic practices. More specifically, these items are the reversal of election results, political violence, voter suppression, and the banning of certain media outlets. The findings provide partial support for the idea that more negative perceptions of opposing parties' commitment to democracy may be fueling increased support for these specific undemocratic

practices. With that said, however, the coefficients remain small and the results inconsistent across the other undemocratic practices measured.

## **Discussion**

Building on existing research on partisan animosity and democratic subversion, this study examines the relationship between misperceptions of out-partisans' commitment to democracy and support for undemocratic practices at the individual level. This research extends prior work by testing this mechanism in three multiparty and moderately polarized contexts—Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom—and by expanding the scope of undemocratic practices considered. These contributions are crucial for advancing the literature on partisan animosity and democratic backsliding beyond the extensively studied case of the United States. The findings of this research yield three key insights into the role of partisan identity and misperceptions in shaping support for undemocratic practices.

First, the results suggest that the relationship between partisan misperceptions and undemocratic attitudes may be limited to highly polarized, bipartisan contexts. While this study finds clear evidence of the presence of partisan misperceptions regarding democratic commitment in all three cases, these misperceptions do not consistently translate into greater support for undemocratic alternatives. One possible explanation is that in multiparty settings, political animosity is diffused across multiple opponents rather than concentrated against a single opposing party (Reiljan, 2020). Additionally, research suggests that polarization tends to be a stronger driver of democratic backsliding when it is both affective and ideological, as seen in the U.S. (McCoy et al., 2018). The moderate levels of polarization in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom may therefore explain the weaker associations observed in this study.

Relatedly, the focus on the U.S. has led scholars to overlook the role of non-partisans and cross-partisans in multiparty settings. In systems with more than two major parties, a significant proportion of the electorate may not have a strong partisan identity. Given that a larger number of parties can increase electoral volatility and dilute partisan attachment (Dassonneville, 2023), it is plausible that partisan misperceptions play a weaker role in driving undemocratic attitudes in these contexts due to the increased volatility of partisan identity. Future research should further explore how the presence of non-partisans and cross-partisans influences the relationship between political identity and democratic attitudes.

Second, partisan misperceptions may only fuel support for undemocratic practices when there is an active process of democratic erosion from opponents. In other words, the mere perception that out-partisans are less committed to democracy may not be sufficient to fuel an undemocratic backlash. It may be that such beliefs need to be reinforced by real or more widely perceived undemocratic behaviours. This challenges previous assumptions that perceptions of out-partisans as anti-democratic necessarily drive support for undemocratic alternatives (Pasek et al., 2022), at least in non-bipartisan settings. Instead, the findings suggest that partisan misperceptions may only have a meaningful impact in contexts where democratic norms are already being actively undermined, either by political elites or through institutional changes (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Third, the study highlights an important limitation in the existing research agenda on partisan animosity and democratic subversion. Indeed, much of the literature conceptualizes undemocratic behavior narrowly, often framing it as actions targeted specifically at political opponents (Braley et al., 2023; Druckman, 2023). For example, survey measures frequently ask about willingness to suppress or delegitimize an opposing party, rather than considering broader forms of democratic erosion that are not partisanship dependent. This overlooks a range of undemocratic practices—

such as weakening judicial independence or restricting civil liberties—that do not directly target political opponents but still undermine democratic norms. The inconsistent results across different undemocratic practices in this study underscore the need for a more nuanced conceptualization of democratic backsliding.

The variation in relationships between partisan misperceptions and different undemocratic practices across the three countries suggests that citizens distinguish between types of democratic subversion. Some undemocratic actions, such as voter suppression and overturning election results, are more overtly partisan and therefore may be more directly linked to perceptions of out-party threats. In contrast, other forms of democratic erosion—such as allowing leaders to bend laws, restricting certain civil organizations, or weakening judicial independence—may not be immediately perceived as partisan tools, making their connection to partisan misperceptions weaker or even counterintuitive. The finding that, in some cases, individuals who perceive their opponents as more democratic are more likely to support certain undemocratic measures suggests that some of these practices may be framed or understood as necessary stabilizing mechanisms rather than as partisan power grabs. This aligns with recent research indicating that support for undemocratic governance can emerge not only from partisan hostility but also from a broader desire for political order and efficiency (Graham & Svobik, 2020).

Furthermore, the inconsistencies between Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom highlight the importance of institutional and cultural contexts in shaping democratic attitudes. The stronger alignment between partisan misperceptions and support for undemocratic practices in the United Kingdom suggests that affective polarization and partisan animosity may play a more significant role in democratic attitudes in this particular context. Conversely, the weaker and sometimes reversed relationships in Australia and Canada suggest that additional factors such as

trust in institutions, historical political stability, or media environments may potentially mitigate the role of partisan misperceptions in driving support for undemocratic governance. Future research should investigate the extent to which institutional differences influence the types of undemocratic practices that are perceived as acceptable or necessary in different democratic settings.

Overall, this study underscores the need for researchers to carefully consider how they conceptualize and measure undemocratic practices. Many studies use narrowly defined measures of democratic erosion, which can create a measurement bias and lead researchers to over or underestimate the relationship between partisan perceptions and support for undemocratic behavior. Given the complexity of democratic backsliding, scholars should either clearly define a narrow concept of undemocratic practices or broaden their operationalization to capture a wider range of anti-democratic measures. A more precise and expansive approach will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how citizens respond to democratic threats in different political contexts.

The findings in this study suggest that while partisan misperceptions regarding democratic commitment are present in multiparty settings, their impact on democratic attitudes is more limited than in the highly polarized, bipartisan context of the United States. Future research should explore the conditions under which partisan misperceptions translate into meaningful threats to democratic norms, particularly by examining cases where democratic erosion is actively occurring. Expanding the study of partisan animosity beyond the U.S. context is essential for developing a more generalizable understanding of how political identity shapes democratic (and undemocratic) attitudes across different institutional settings.

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## Supplementary Material

### Research Ethics

This study was approved by the University of Ottawa's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board (Project # S-09-24-10057) and complies with both the *Tri-Council Policy Statement 2* (TCPS-2) as well as APSA's *Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research*. The experiment was made possible through funding by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Canada and the author received additional research funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. There are no known conflicts of interests to disclose. The study did not include any form of deception: participants were fully aware they were taking part in a scientific study and provided their informed consent.

Participants were recruited through the market research platform Qualtrics between 28 November 2024 and 5 December 2024. To be eligible, respondents had to be citizens of Australia, Canada or the United Kingdom. All participants were fairly compensated at Qualtrics' pre-established rate of \$2.10 (based on hourly rate of \$15.75 for an average survey completion time of 8 minutes).

### Measures and Survey Items

Below is a list of survey questions used to measure the many variables used in this study. These range from sociodemographic indicators to scales of political attitudes.

**AGE:** How old are you? [dropdown list from 18 to 99]

**GENDER:** How do you describe yourself?

- a. Male
- b. Female
- c. You do not have an option that applies to me. I identify as: [fill-in]

**EDUCATION:** What is the highest level of education you have completed? If still a student, please mark the current level of education.

- a. Secondary school or lower
- b. Further education (academic or vocational, including undergraduate studies)
- c. Higher education (professional degree, master's or doctorate)

**PARTY ID:** Do you generally think of yourself as a little closer to one of the political parties than the others? If yes, which party? [country-specific political party dropdown list]

**ECONOMIC Insecurity:** Which of the following comes closest to how you feel about your household's income nowadays?

- a. Living comfortably on present income (1)
- b. Challenging to live on present income (2)
- c. Very difficult to live on present income (3)

The following table presents the list of political parties included in the survey for each country. To be included, a political party had to meet the 5% vote share (exception when party is of regional significance, e.g., Scottish National Party). This is in line with existing research which classifies political parties as *effective* or *non-effective*.

**Table 4.5.** List of political parties for each country

Australia	Labor Party Liberal-National Coalition Australian Greens One Nation United Australia Party
Canada	Liberal Party of Canada Conservative Party of Canada New Democratic Party Bloc Québécois Green Party of Canada People's Party of Canada
United Kingdom	Labour Party Conservative Party Liberal Democrats Scottish National Party Reform UK Green Party

## Complete Models

**Table 4.6.** Complete regression models of support for undemocratic practices in Australia

	Reverse elections	Political violence	Voter fraud	Ban social media	Ban Rallies	Govt can bend laws	Suppress voters	Leader is above law	Ignore courts	Ban candidates	Ban media	Ban civil orgs
(Intercept)	3.671*** (0.242)	3.864*** (0.229)	3.430*** (0.235)	3.540*** (0.237)	3.779*** (0.221)	3.409*** (0.234)	3.352*** (0.229)	3.345*** (0.228)	3.357*** (0.212)	3.731*** (0.228)	3.635*** (0.218)	2.738*** (0.209)
Misperceptions	0.013 (0.021)	0.010 (0.020)	0.042* (0.021)	-0.003 (0.021)	-0.028 (0.020)	0.071*** (0.021)	0.040* (0.020)	0.070*** (0.020)	0.060** (0.019)	-0.028 (0.020)	-0.019 (0.019)	0.092*** (0.019)
Age	-0.018*** (0.002)	-0.025*** (0.002)	-0.024*** (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)	-0.006** (0.002)	-0.021*** (0.002)	-0.019*** (0.002)	-0.020*** (0.002)	-0.014*** (0.002)	-0.004 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)	0.008*** (0.002)
Gender	-0.041 (0.081)	0.001 (0.077)	-0.100 (0.079)	0.148 (0.079)	0.178* (0.074)	0.102 (0.078)	-0.081 (0.077)	-0.099 (0.076)	0.116 (0.071)	0.208** (0.076)	0.104 (0.073)	-0.077 (0.070)
Education	-0.163** (0.052)	-0.117* (0.050)	-0.071 (0.051)	-0.129* (0.051)	-0.110* (0.048)	-0.082 (0.051)	-0.019 (0.049)	-0.113* (0.049)	-0.118* (0.046)	-0.019 (0.049)	0.001 (0.047)	-0.048 (0.045)
PID	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.003** (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	-0.003** (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.003** (0.001)	-0.002* (0.001)	-0.002* (0.001)	-0.002* (0.001)	-0.002* (0.001)
Economic Ins.	0.019 (0.059)	0.000 (0.056)	-0.122* (0.057)	-0.110 (0.058)	-0.001 (0.054)	-0.033 (0.057)	-0.058 (0.056)	-0.135* (0.056)	-0.026 (0.052)	0.035 (0.056)	-0.043 (0.053)	-0.085 (0.051)
<i>N</i>	1,003	1,003	1,003	1,003	1,003	1,003	1,003	1,003	1,003	1,003	1,003	1,003
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.058	0.119	0.118	0.009	0.022	0.103	0.076	0.102	0.065	0.012	0.001	0.063
Log. Lik.	-1629.72	-1575.93	-1603.18	-1608.86	-1538.85	-1596.71	-1574.49	-1571.47	-1497.85	-1573.01	-1528.21	-1485.66
RMSE	1.23	1.16	1.20	1.20	1.12	1.19	1.16	1.16	1.08	1.16	1.11	1.06

Note: \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

**Table 4.7.** Complete regression models of support for undemocratic practices in Canada

	Reverse elections	Political violence	Voter fraud	Ban social media	Ban Rallies	Govt can bend laws	Suppress voters	Leader is above law	Ignore courts	Ban candidates	Ban media	Ban civil orgs
(Intercept)	3.570*** (0.250)	3.742*** (0.230)	2.984*** (0.247)	3.989*** (0.245)	3.342*** (0.226)	3.154*** (0.237)	3.516*** (0.248)	3.373*** (0.248)	3.289*** (0.223)	3.798*** (0.244)	3.391*** (0.228)	2.540*** (0.221)
Misperceptions	-0.008 (0.021)	-0.023 (0.019)	0.044* (0.021)	-0.045* (0.021)	0.005 (0.019)	0.087*** (0.020)	-0.015 (0.021)	0.050* (0.021)	0.041* (0.019)	-0.010 (0.020)	-0.025 (0.019)	0.060** (0.019)
Age	-0.020*** (0.002)	-0.026*** (0.002)	-0.029*** (0.002)	-0.005 (0.002)	-0.008*** (0.002)	-0.022*** (0.002)	-0.019*** (0.002)	-0.022*** (0.002)	-0.014*** (0.002)	-0.004 (0.002)	-0.003 (0.002)	0.007*** (0.002)
Gender	0.133 (0.080)	0.039 (0.074)	0.090 (0.079)	-0.019 (0.079)	0.116 (0.072)	0.169* (0.076)	0.136 (0.080)	-0.059 (0.080)	0.201** (0.071)	0.081 (0.078)	0.077 (0.073)	0.116 (0.071)
Education	0.064 (0.054)	0.092 (0.050)	0.192*** (0.054)	-0.070 (0.053)	0.049 (0.049)	0.076 (0.052)	0.060 (0.054)	0.053 (0.054)	-0.002 (0.048)	-0.075 (0.053)	0.061 (0.050)	0.134** (0.048)
PID	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	-0.002* (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.003** (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Economic Ins.	-0.090 (0.060)	-0.022 (0.056)	-0.066 (0.060)	-0.052 (0.059)	-0.019 (0.055)	-0.030 (0.057)	-0.093 (0.060)	-0.146* (0.060)	-0.094 (0.054)	-0.009 (0.059)	0.056 (0.055)	-0.101 (0.054)
<i>N</i>	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.069	0.126	0.153	0.007	0.016	0.111	0.063	0.091	0.050	0.001	0.010	0.036
Log. Lik.	-1630.11	-1546.91	-1620.69	-1612.64	-1527.97	-1577.71	-1624.36	-1623.57	-1515.39	-1604.87	-1540.44	-1508.15
RMSE	1.24	1.14	1.22	1.21	1.12	1.17	1.23	1.23	1.10	1.20	1.13	1.09

Note: \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

**Table 4.8.** Complete regression models of support for undemocratic practices in the United Kingdom

	Reverse elections	Political violence	Voter fraud	Ban social media	Ban Rallies	Govt can bend laws	Suppress voters	Leader is above law	Ignore courts	Ban candidates	Ban media	Ban civil orgs
(Intercept)	3.615*** (0.247)	3.917*** (0.231)	3.444*** (0.238)	2.896*** (0.247)	3.109*** (0.216)	3.792*** (0.240)	3.580*** (0.235)	3.276*** (0.241)	3.388*** (0.216)	3.565*** (0.231)	3.743*** (0.230)	2.911*** (0.211)
Misperceptions	-0.080*** (0.021)	-0.063** (0.019)	-0.034 (0.020)	-0.028 (0.021)	-0.027 (0.018)	0.023 (0.020)	-0.079*** (0.020)	-0.009 (0.020)	0.015 (0.018)	-0.022 (0.019)	-0.048* (0.019)	0.030 (0.018)
Age	-0.016*** (0.002)	-0.022*** (0.002)	-0.025*** (0.002)	0.005* (0.002)	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.025*** (0.002)	-0.015*** (0.002)	-0.024*** (0.002)	-0.014*** (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.005* (0.002)	0.008*** (0.002)
Gender	0.275*** (0.079)	0.074 (0.074)	0.032 (0.076)	0.263*** (0.079)	0.182** (0.070)	0.102 (0.077)	-0.036 (0.076)	0.024 (0.078)	0.021 (0.069)	0.162* (0.074)	0.030 (0.074)	-0.124 (0.068)
Education	0.077 (0.052)	0.011 (0.048)	0.018 (0.050)	0.039 (0.052)	0.125** (0.045)	0.059 (0.050)	0.046 (0.049)	0.109* (0.051)	-0.027 (0.045)	0.035 (0.049)	0.074 (0.048)	0.117** (0.044)
PID	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.003** (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.003*** (0.001)	-0.002* (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.002* (0.001)
Economic Ins.	-0.031 (0.062)	-0.002 (0.058)	-0.014 (0.059)	0.098 (0.062)	0.003 (0.054)	-0.134* (0.060)	-0.014 (0.059)	-0.047 (0.060)	0.010 (0.054)	-0.044 (0.058)	-0.074 (0.057)	-0.096 (0.053)
<i>N</i>	1,022	1,022	1,022	1,022	1,022	1,022	1,022	1,022	1,022	1,022	1,022	1,022
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.077	0.112	0.123	0.015	0.025	0.131	0.057	0.116	0.041	0.003	0.011	0.044
Log. Lik.	-1668.15	-1597.62	-1629.16	-1666.17	-1532.96	-1638.46	-1617.05	-1642.99	-1530.98	-1599.82	-1595.75	-1507.73
RMSE	1.24	1.16	1.19	1.24	1.08	1.20	1.18	1.21	1.08	1.16	1.15	1.06

Note: \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

## **Chapter 5: Economic Insecurity, Perceptions of Crime, and Democratic Trade-Offs**

### **Abstract**

To what extent are citizens willing to support undemocratic practices? With the recent waves of democratic backsliding around the world, the answer to this question has become increasingly important. Existing studies find that citizens are willing to trade democratic institutions and political rights for better economic and physical security. But are individuals equally willing to trade different dimensions of democracy? Using a pre-registered conjoint experiment in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom ( $N = 3,033$ ), I test the willingness of citizens to trade five different dimensions of democracy in exchange for better material and physical security. The results of the experiment demonstrate that citizens are less willing to compromise on elections and political rights, but more open to forgo accountability mechanisms. These findings make a substantial contribution to the literature on citizen support for democratic backsliding by identifying which dimensions of democracy people are least (and most) likely to abandon.

## Introduction

In a world dominated by partisan animosity and polarization, public support for democracy remains consistently high (Graham & Svobik, 2020; Wuttke et al., 2022). Despite this evidence, recent years have seen a number of instances in which political actors who engaged in undemocratic practices were not punished at the polls. Two notable European examples include Poland and Hungary, where elected authoritarian leaders and parties have been successful in eroding the quality of democratic institutions and processes while facing no widespread backlash from the electorate (Bernhard, 2021; Wunsch & Gessler, 2023).<sup>5</sup> What can explain this paradox; whereas citizens unequivocally express their support for democracy, but then proceed to be blind to transgressions and support authoritarian alternatives?

Recent studies argue that while citizens may support democracy in theory, their ability to prove this support *in practice* is limited by other factors and conditions that can take precedence over their democratic convictions, essentially making them “democrats in name only” (Wuttke et al., 2022, p. 416). Since the survival of democracy depends largely on the ability of citizens to abide by democratic norms and hold political actors who infringe these norms to account, simply supporting democracy as a concept does not suffice in preventing democratic erosion (Lipset, 1959; Qi & Shin, 2011; Schedler, 2021).

The works of Adserà et al. (2023) and Neundorff et al. (2024) provide important developments in understanding why citizens may turn their backs on democracy in support of authoritarian alternatives. They demonstrate that while citizens place significant importance on democracy,

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<sup>5</sup> In Poland, the incumbent Law and Justice (PiS) party has won the popular vote in the three latest parliamentary elections despite its adoption of a range of undemocratic policies (changes to the judicial system and electoral law). In Hungary, the Fidesz party – led by self-described “illiberal democrat” Viktor Orbán – has held onto a supermajority in the National Assembly since 2010, even after passing a new constitution deemed as undemocratic and executive-centric (eliminating key judicial oversight as well as checks and balances).

many may be willing to trade democratic institutions and political rights for better economic and social outcomes, including financial prosperity and physical security (Adserà et al., 2023; Neundorf et al., 2024). These findings are consequential and important; however, they stem from conjoint experiments that focus on democracy broadly defined and do not capture the specific practical components associated with democracy and its erosion. In both cases, these studies do not take into account the plethora of democratic institutions and processes that exist within polyarchies—institutions which can each, individually or collectively, be the target of authoritarian forces.

Building on these innovative studies, I seek to expand our understanding of citizens' support for democratic backsliding by considering multiple dimensions of democracy and focusing on tangible conditions of democratic erosion. In doing so, this study aims to answer the following research question: are citizens equally willing to trade different dimensions of democracy for better economic conditions and lower crime rates? And if not, which dimensions are they most (and least) likely to be willing to trade-off?

To answer this question, I design a paired-profile conjoint experiment across three stable consolidated democracies: Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom ( $N = 3,033$ ).<sup>6</sup> This pre-registered conjoint experiment exposes respondents to three pairs of hypothetical societies and tasks them with deciding which they would prefer to live in (this 3x2 design yields a total effective sample size of 18,198 observations). Each society randomly varies along seven attributes, namely the economy, crime rates, elections, free speech, media freedom, checks and balances, and political

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<sup>6</sup> These three countries consistently rank as some of the most democratic in the world across a variety of indices including V-Dem, Polity IV, the EUI Democracy Index, and Freedom House Index. Testing the democratic trade-off hypothesis in these countries provides a “most challenging case” strategy. This is particularly true since we would expect the citizens of these countries to be least likely to turn away from democracy when compared to less democratic countries, as demonstrated by Neundorf et al. (2024) and Frederiksen (2022).

accountability. The attributes and levels were designed to capture five specific dimensions of democracy and reflect realistic conditions of democratic backsliding, setting this research apart from its closest precedents (see Adserà et al., 2023; Neundorf et al., 2024).

The results of the experiment reveal that citizens are more likely to trade dimensions of democracy with which they do not directly engage with or are less prominent features of democratic governance. Indeed, respondents are far more willing to forgo executive accountability and checks and balances in exchange for physical and economic security when compared to other dimensions such as elections and free speech. In fact, in line with the findings of Adserà et al. (2023), I find that citizens value elections and free speech more than economic performance and crime rates, albeit the difference in these preferences is small. Overall, these findings demonstrate that citizens treat distinct dimensions of democracy unequally, placing relatively higher importance on some attributes and being more willing to let go of others.

By taking into consideration the multidimensional nature of democracy and the numerous institutions in which democratic erosion can take hold, this study contributes to a growing literature which seeks to understand why citizens support undemocratic practices and authoritarian governance. Substantively, this study makes two contributions. First, by building a conjoint experiment with realistic conditions of democratic backsliding, it provides a more externally-valid causal demonstration of the democratic trade-off hypothesis. Second, it reveals that, in the context of the democratic trade-off hypothesis, citizens do not weigh every dimension of democracy equally and are willing to trade some dimensions more than others. This has repercussions on our understanding of democratic citizenship, but also informs research on the success of would-be autocrats around the world.

## **Trading democracy for authoritarian alternatives**

The question of whether citizens would trade democracy for authoritarian alternatives—particularly in exchange for improved economic or social outcomes—has become increasingly salient in recent years. This attention is warranted: in 2024, the number of countries where the quality of democracy was eroding surpassed the number of countries where democracy was improving (Nord et al., 2024). Around the world, concerns about the erosion of democracy and the rise of authoritarian populism confirm this evidence (Wuttke et al., 2022).

The democratic trade-off hypothesis emerges from the notion that citizens may seek to prioritize their political, economic, and social interests at the expense of certain democratic principles. Existing research supports these observations. A study by Cianetti and Hanley (2021) identifies a global trend of democratic backsliding where citizens, disillusioned by economic instability and perceived governmental inefficacy, become more susceptible to authoritarian appeals. This phenomenon, often termed “creeping authoritarianism,” affirms that the erosion of democratic norms is particularly likely when economic and social insecurities prevail (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 66). Further research also finds that individual support for democracy is lower when individuals believe that the economy is doing poorly (Cordero & Simón, 2016; Konstantinidis & Xezonakis, 2013). More specifically, Zagórski et al. (2021) highlight that support for authoritarian populist parties and leaders is closely related to negative perceptions of the economy, particularly if these political actors propose a strong pro-economy rhetoric.

Adserà et al. (2023) specifically assess the existence of a democratic trade-off at the individual level. Using a conjoint experiment across the United States, France, and Brazil, their findings reveal a robust attachment to democratic values among citizens. Yet, this support is conditional: substantial increases in personal income correlate with reduced commitment to democratic

institutions. Optimistically, however, their study underscores that free elections are the most valued feature of society and that respondents, on average, require a tripling of their income to consider abandoning democracy (Adserà et al., 2023).

Expanding on these findings, Neundorf and colleagues (2024) examine citizens' preference for material and physical security over democracy. Their experimental evidence indicates that when democratic systems fail to meet citizens' essential needs, authoritarian preferences may emerge. This finding aligns with prior research suggesting that basic material and physical security needs significantly influence citizens' governance preferences, potentially outweighing democratic values when unmet (Desai et al., 2009; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Collectively, these studies suggest that individuals' willingness to trade democracy for authoritarian alternatives is intricately linked to the supply of economic and physical security.

This perspective fits well with existing accounts of contemporary democratic backsliding and autocratization. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) demonstrate, the death of democracies no longer takes place through armed conflict or coups, but rather typically occurs at the hands of democratically-elected leaders through a slow and measured process. Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) further agree that “gradual declines of democratic regime attributes characterize contemporary autocratization” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (p. 1095). This “slow death” account of democratic erosion implies that leaders with authoritarian tendencies are both elected through free and fair elections and not overtly punished for their undemocratic tendencies, two assumptions that are in line with the notion of a democratic trade-off among voters (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, 2020). Indeed, the democratic trade-off hypothesis explains, to a certain extent, why citizens would willingly elect a leader who proposes and enacts authoritarian policies. This is particularly true if the leaders harboring authoritarian tendencies adopt a rhetoric focused on economic growth and

being tough on crime (i.e., material and physical security), two policy areas for which we know individuals are open to trading democracy for.

The works of Adserà et al. (2023) and Neundorf et al. (2024) represent significant advances in understanding why citizens may trade democracy for better material and physical security. Their innovative use of conjoint experiments sheds light on how economic and social trade-offs influence democratic support, revealing the conditional nature of citizens' attachment to democratic principles. Importantly, they contribute to a growing literature, including foundational works by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, 2020) and Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), which emphasize the gradual and multifaceted nature of democratic erosion and autocratization.

However, while these contributions are critical, they leave room for expansion. Specifically, existing studies tend to treat democracy as a monolithic concept, broadly defined as free elections and fundamental rights. This approach overlooks the multidimensional nature of democracy, which encompasses a range of interconnected institutions, practices, policies, and norms. From judicial independence and legislative accountability to civil liberties and media freedom, each dimension of democracy can be targeted selectively by authoritarian forces. Furthermore, existing research primarily focus on aggregate trends or general trade-offs, neglecting the specificity of democratic backsliding as a process that unfolds through particular mechanisms and affects distinct democratic dimensions differently.

This study seeks to contribute to this ongoing research agenda by examining the specificity and multidimensionality of democratic erosion. By doing so, I aim to provide a more detailed account of how citizens perceive and prioritize different democratic institutions and values when faced with material or security trade-offs. In doing so, I build upon and expand on the frameworks provided by Adserà et al. (2023) and Neundorf et al. (2024), providing a complementary

perspective that situates individual trade-offs within more specific instances of democratic erosion.

### **Giving up some dimensions of democracy more than others?**

As previously mentioned, existing research on public support for democracy and the democratic trade-off hypothesis focus extensively on democracy broadly defined, an approach which assumes that citizens perceive and value all dimensions of democracy equally (or at least that doesn't consider the possibility that citizens value distinct dimensions of democracy differently). However, evidence increasingly suggests that people prioritize specific democratic components, viewing some as essential while deeming others as less critical (Chu et al., 2024; Wiesner et al., 2024). Empirical studies have shown, for instance, that citizens consistently identify civil liberties and free and fair elections as foundational pillars of democracy, often placing comparatively lower importance on other dimensions (Baviskar & Malone, 2004; Chu et al., 2024).

Building on this understanding, this research investigates how the multidimensional nature of democracy influences citizen support for democratic erosion across different dimensions. Specifically, this study posits that citizens—given their varied valuation of democratic components—may be selectively tolerant of authoritarian alternatives depending on which democratic institutions or rights are at stake. This study therefore takes its roots from the idea that citizens value distinct dimensions of democracy differently (Chu et al., 2024), which suggests that they hold a selective, multidimensional view of democracy that may shape how they perceive threats to democratic institutions and potentially affects how they make decisions when faced with such threats (Kaftan & Gessler, 2024).

As part of this multidimensional democratic trade-off framework, I draw on prospect theory to argue that citizens' willingness to exchange particular democratic attributes for improvements

in the economy and lower crime rates is shaped by how these dimensions are perceived relative to their reference points (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; McDermott, 2004). Some dimensions, such as civil liberties, may be viewed as indispensable, while others, like checks and balances, might carry lower perceived utility. This differentiation arises because individuals are generally more averse to losing attributes they regard as fundamental to their daily lives but are more open to trading away dimensions perceived as abstract or less relevant to their immediate needs (Levy, 1992).

Citizens' risk preferences also vary based on their perception of potential losses and gains. When a democratic dimension is perceived as fundamental and non-negotiable, individuals are less likely to risk trading it away. Conversely, dimensions seen as less immediately impactful may be perceived as more negotiable. In this framework, citizens evaluate the importance of democratic dimensions relative to their personal reference points (e.g., their evaluations of the dimensions). Accordingly, democratic attributes deeply embedded in daily life, such as freedom of speech and elections, are likely to be seen as significant losses if eroded. By contrast, abstract dimensions, such as judicial independence or checks and balances, may carry lower perceived utility, rendering them more expendable in exchange for tangible material benefits.

I therefore argue that the probability of opting for an authoritarian alternative depends largely on the perceived utility of the democratic dimension being sacrificed relative to the benefits offered by the improvement in the economy or crime rates (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; Levy, 1992). Holding the value of the alternative constant—namely, improved economic conditions and reduced crime—the likelihood of trading a democratic attribute diminishes if the citizen assigns high importance and utility to a given democratic attribute. Consequently, I argue that citizens' willingness to accept authoritarian alternatives varies across democratic dimensions, with greater

resistance anticipated for dimensions viewed as foundational to democracy. By aligning this theoretical mechanism with recent empirical research, I can formulate clear hypotheses as to which of the five dimensions included in this study are least (and most) likely to be traded for better economic conditions and lower crime rates.

In recent works, Chu et al. (2024) and Chapman et al. (2024) demonstrate that citizens place higher value on democratic dimensions like elections and civil liberties. These dimensions are generally regarded as more indispensable because they underpin both political representation and personal freedoms (Przeworski, 2018). Survey data further corroborate this, showing that individuals consistently prioritize elections and civil liberties over other democratic institutions or principles (Chu et al., 2024; Kaftan & Gessler, 2024).

## **Testing the multidimensional democratic trade-off framework**

In line with the proposed framework, I hypothesize that citizens may be willing to forgo democracy in exchange for the fulfillment of their physical and material needs. However, I argue that this willingness is not uniform across all dimensions of democracy. Instead, the likelihood of citizens supporting the trade-off of a specific democratic dimension for improved economic and physical security depends on the perceived utility and salience of that dimension.

It is necessary, for the purpose of this study, to limit our analyses to a handful of dimensions of democracy.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, this study focuses on five dimensions of democracy that are both foundational to its functioning and particularly vulnerable to backsliding: elections, free speech,

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<sup>7</sup> This is required to limit the complexity of the conjoint experiment. I should note that while this study focuses on five crucial dimensions of democracy, I do not operate under the assumption that these are the only important dimensions of a democracy. Future research ought to build on this work and expand my framework to additional aspects of democracy. With that said, the five dimensions selected herein constitute a logical and sufficient starting point to test a multidimensional democratic trade-off hypothesis.

media freedom, checks on the executive, and political accountability. These dimensions are crucial for the effective operation of democratic systems, and their erosion reflects the realities of contemporary autocratization. By focusing on these dimensions, this study provides insights into realistic democratic trade-offs citizens may be confronted with. Before formulating the hypotheses, I propose a description of these five dimensions and examine how they are both relevant and important for the study of democratic backsliding.

First, elections constitute the most visible and indispensable institution in a democracy. They represent the primary mechanism for transferring power, enabling citizens to hold leaders accountable and ensuring that governance remains rooted in public consent (Przeworski, 2018). Free and fair elections are therefore the cornerstone of democratic legitimacy, making their integrity particularly susceptible to authoritarian manipulation (Norris, 2014). Rather than abolishing elections outright, contemporary autocrats often engage in more subtle forms of electoral manipulation (Schedler, 2002). This includes voter suppression, unequal election finance regulations, and tampering with electoral oversight bodies to create an uneven playing field (Bermeo, 2016; Norris, 2014). For example, in Turkey, the Erdoğan administration has systematically eroded electoral fairness through measures that disproportionately disadvantage opposition parties (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016). Because elections are central to public perceptions of democracy and legitimacy, their manipulation often serves as an initial step in democratic backsliding, making them a critical dimension for understanding citizens' willingness to trade democracy for other benefits. This dimension of democracy is also typically the one included to measure democratic trade-offs in existing studies (see Adserà et al., 2023; Neundorf et al., 2024), making its inclusion in this study particularly relevant.

Beyond elections, Kneuer (2021) points to the tendency for aspiring autocrats to limit

freedoms and rights in an attempt to eliminate any momentum among opposition actors. This can take the form of restricting civil liberties and political rights. As one of the most salient of such liberties, free speech is fundamental to democracy as it allows citizens to express opinions, hold governments accountable, and foster public debate (Dahl, 1971). Authoritarian actors often target this freedom to suppress dissent, silence critics, and consolidate control. By limiting free speech, these leaders curtail the public's ability to challenge undemocratic actions, paving the way for further erosion of democratic institutions (Kneuer, 2021). The inclusion of free speech in this study is warranted by its significance as one of the ultimate civil liberties, but also because of its vulnerability to undemocratic assaults.

Closely related to free speech, media freedom is vital for ensuring government accountability and transparency. An independent media acts as a watchdog, exposing corruption, abuses of power, and policy failures. However, it is often one of the first targets of would-be autocrats seeking to control the flow of information and shape public perceptions. In Hungary, for example, the incumbent Fidesz party—led by Victor Orbán—seized control of many national news organizations, effectively transforming the media into a state-run operation (Griffen, 2020; Polyák, 2019). Doing so limited the ability of dissenting opinion to gain traction while maintaining a mirage of access to information among citizens. Including media freedom alongside free speech is important considering the significance of these dimensions and the ease with which they are targeted by authoritarian forces.

Finally, democratic backsliding can also occur at the executive level through what has been labeled executive aggrandizement. Defined as the practice whereby leaders “gradually dismantle institutional checks on their power” (Bessen, 2024, p. 2119), executive aggrandizement is one of the most common forms of contemporary democratic backsliding and an ongoing challenge across

many consolidated democracies (Bermeo, 2016). This concept can refer to a wide range of practices, but often encompasses the elimination of checks and balances as well as key political accountability mechanisms (Laebens, 2023; Sadurski, 2018).

For the purpose of this study, I consider two forms of executive aggrandizement, namely the disruption of parliamentary checks and balances as well as the practice of granting political immunity (where a political leader grants themselves immunity from criminal prosecution, placing them above the law). These two practices have taken place in a number of backsliding democracies, including Hungary and Ecuador (Freeman, 2020). For instance, in Ecuador, successive governments have used constitutional amendments to shield executives from prosecution, undermining the principle that no one is above the law (Freeman, 2020).

The selection of these five dimensions reflects their dual importance as both critical components of democracy and common targets of authoritarian forces. They encompass procedural and substantive aspects of democratic governance, ranging from mechanisms for choosing leaders (elections) to safeguards against abuses of power (checks on the executive and political accountability) and protections for civil liberties (free speech and media freedom). Moreover, these dimensions are frequently implicated in contemporary cases of democratic erosion (see, for examples, Bermeo, 2016; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). Authoritarian leaders often strategically target specific components based on their vulnerability and perceived impact. By focusing on these dimensions, this study captures realistic trade-offs that citizens may face when evaluating the costs and benefits of democratic erosion.

Finally, examining these five attributes aligns with the broader objective of understanding the democratic trade-off hypothesis through a multidimensional lens. Citizens are unlikely to weigh all aspects of democracy equally when faced with material or physical insecurity, nor is it likely

that they will be asked to weigh democracy as a generic concept. By studying the five specific dimensions of democracy outlined here, this research provides nuanced insights into how individuals may prioritize certain democratic values and whether they may tolerate backsliding for some democratic institutions and features more so than others.

## **Hypotheses**

Building on the multidimensional democratic trade-off framework and focusing on the five selected dimensions of democracy, I propose two hypotheses. First, I hypothesize that citizens will exhibit greater reluctance to trade elections and civil liberties when compared to other democratic institutions or norms:

**Hypothesis 1:** Relative to other dimensions of democracy, individuals will be less willing to trade elections and civil liberties in exchange for better material and physical security.

In this study, political rights (i.e., civil liberties) are operationalized by the dimensions of free speech and media freedom—two pillars of democratic life. Alongside the erosion of elections, the erosion of these dimensions has direct implications for citizens’ daily lives, restricting their ability to express themselves (free speech) and to access information (media freedom), leading me to argue that citizens will be least likely to be willing to trade them for better economic conditions and lower crime rates.

The second hypothesis considers democratic dimensions that may be perceived as secondary, such as checks on executive power and political accountability. These dimensions, while vital to the broader functioning of democracy, are less directly tied to the daily political engagement of ordinary citizens. Unlike voting rights or free and fair elections, executive constraints and checks and balances often operate in the background, making them less salient in the public imagination (Chu et al., 2024). Indeed, citizens rarely participate in processes involving institutional checks

and balances outside of elections. As a result, these dimensions may be viewed as less critical and, therefore, more flexible when individuals evaluate trade-offs. Citizens may be more inclined to relax these constraints in exchange for perceived gains in economic stability or physical security, as summarized by the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** Relative to other dimensions of democracy, individuals will be more willing to trade checks and balances and political accountability in exchange for better material and physical security.

In summary, these two hypotheses encapsulate the multidimensional democratic trade-off framework: citizens' valuation of democratic dimensions is selective and influences their openness to authoritarian alternatives. By recognizing these differential valuations, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of public support for democracy and the conditions under which democratic erosion may gather implicit or explicit approval from the population.

## **Methodology**

To test citizens' preference for different dimensions of democracy relative to economic and physical security, I conduct a paired-profile conjoint experiment across three contemporary democracies: Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. This pre-registered conjoint experiment exposes respondents to three pairs of hypothetical societies and tasks them with deciding which they would prefer to live in as well as rating each individual society. The profiles randomly vary along seven attributes: elections, free speech, media freedom, checks on the executive, and political accountability. In this context, a conjoint experiment allows me to simultaneously assess the relative importance of the included components. Such experimental design is particularly well-suited for this study because it mimics real-world decision-making processes and provides a

nuanced understanding of trade-offs between democratic principles and economic/security concerns. This section provides further details on the method, including case selection, the data collection process, and the experimental design.

### **Case selection**

This experiment focuses on Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom for several reasons. Most notably, these countries are institutionally similar. Indeed, all three countries share the Westminster-style system, which ensures they have similar institutional structures, including a fusion of powers, parliamentary checks and balances, and single-winner electoral systems.<sup>8</sup> By using countries with similar institutional designs, I am able to design more specific dimensions and levels for the conjoint while maintaining a cross-national and comparative sample. Moreover, I also rely on these countries because of their high levels of democracy, which serves as a “most challenging case” strategy to test a democratic trade-off hypothesis.

### **Data collection**

The data was collected between 28 November and 4 December 2024. Overall, 3,329 respondents were recruited from a Qualtrics online panel. Of these, 52 did not consent, 208 were not eligible because of citizenship status, 12 did not complete the survey, and 24 failed the attention check.<sup>9</sup> This leaves us with a sample of 3,033 respondents and an effective sample size of 18,198 (3x2 conjoint design). Table 4.2 presents the sociodemographic composition of the sample at the country-level and pooled. As we can see, the sample is well balanced both within and between

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<sup>8</sup> Australia’s electoral system is more complex than that of Canada or the United Kingdom, however the outcomes remain similar in that these countries have two (or three) major parties between which executive power alternates and some smaller (national or regional) parties.

<sup>9</sup> In order to take part in the survey, respondents had to be citizens of the respective country in which the survey was fielded. Moreover, respondents had to complete an attention check which consisted in selecting the colour from a list.

countries. More details on the sample composition, including the survey quotas and balance tests, are available in the material.

**Table 5.** Sample composition (pooled and by country)

	<b>Pooled Sample</b> ( <i>N</i> = 3,033)	<b>Australia</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,005)	<b>Canada</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,002)	<b>United Kingdom</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,026)
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	45.98	46.11	43.84	47.95
Female	54.01	53.89	56.16	52.05
<b>Age</b>				
18-29	20.39	20.92	18.58	21.64
30-49	37.02	36.75	38.46	35.87
50-64	23.59	21.41	27.17	22.22
65+	19.00	20.92	15.78	20.27
<b>Education</b>				
Secondary or less	28.37	31.37	25.27	28.46
University degree	40.75	40.44	44.66	37.23
Higher education	30.88	28.19	30.07	34.31
<b>Ideology</b>				
Left	16.51	16.17	16.08	17.25
Centre	58.04	60.98	56.94	56.24
Right	25.45	22.85	26.97	26.54

*Note:* Entries are percentages. Categories do not necessarily add up to 100% due to missing responses.

Prior to completing the conjoint tasks, respondents answered a sociodemographic questionnaire. This included providing their age, gender, province/region of residence, education level, and household income. In addition to this questionnaire, participants completed several political attitudes measures, including left-right political orientation, support for democracy, satisfaction with the democratic process, perception of economic condition, and perception of physical security. The complete details of these measures, including question wording, can be found in the supplementary material.

### **Conjoint experiment design**

As mentioned above, each participant will be tasked with choosing between two hypothetical

country profiles that randomly vary on seven key dimensions: economic condition, crime rates, electoral integrity, voting rights, constraints on the executive, political accountability, and free speech. The primary objective is to evaluate how each attribute impacts the likelihood of a profile being preferred, both individually and in interaction with other factors.

Table 6 presents the dimensions and levels of the conjoint experiment. The levels were designed to capture five specific dimensions of democracy and reflect realistic conditions of democratic backsliding. As mentioned previously, the five dimensions were selected for their relevance in the study of democratic backsliding; the same logic was applied in the creation of the levels. This approach meant developing statements for each level that are specific enough to reflect real conditions of democratic trade-off. The economic and crime rates dimensions are added to the five democratic dimensions to encapsulate the trade-off with material and physical security.

**Table 6.** Dimensions and levels of conjoint experiment

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Levels (R = Reference level)</b>
Economy	1. People generally live comfortably on their income and can afford most things they need. 2. Many people struggle to live on their income and must make decisions about what they can afford. (R)
Crime	1. Crime rates in the country are low and stable. 2. The country struggles with high crime rates. (R)
Elections	1. Citizens elect their leaders in free and fair elections. 2. Citizens go to the polls, but elections are neither free nor fair. (R)
Media	1. Media organizations are free and not influenced by the government. 2. The government controls media organizations and influence their content. (R)
Accountability	1. Political leaders who have a majority of support are protected from criminal prosecution. 2. Political leaders who have a majority of support are not protected from criminal investigations and prosecution. (R)
Free Speech	1. People can criticize the government in public without getting prosecuted by authorities. 2. People could get prosecuted by authorities when criticizing the government in public. (R)
Checks & Balances	1. The prime minister must answer to the Parliament and courts. 2. The prime minister can rule without constraints from Parliament and courts. (R)

As a manipulation check, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which changes to each of the dimensions in the conjoint would affect them on a scale from 0 = *would not affect me*

to 10 = *would affect me a lot*. This question was asked after all three conjoint tasks were completed and will only be used to verify the underlying importance respondents assign to each dimension of democracy included in the experiment.

## **Analysis Plan**

To evaluate my hypotheses, I employ simple linear regression with respondent-clustered standard errors (Hainmueller et al., 2014).<sup>10</sup> I calculate the Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs), which capture the average impact of each individual factor when all other factors are held constant at their means. I provide the results for two complementary models: the binary “choice” outcome (whether a profile was selected over the paired alternative) and the individual ratings for each conjoint card. By analyzing both choice outcomes and card ratings, I can capture not only the attributes that drive selection between profiles but also the specific appeal or aversion to each attribute in isolation (Elrod et al., 1992).

In addition to AMCEs, I conduct Willingness to Pay (WTP) analyses to quantify the trade-offs respondents are willing to make between democratic attributes relative to the economy and crime levels. In this context, WTP analysis allows me to interpret respondents’ preferences in terms of how much more (or less) important a democracy-related attribute is compared to the economy and crime attributes. This involves calculating the marginal ratio of the AMCE of a given democratic attribute to the AMCE of the economy and crime attributes. More details on the analytical strategy and calculations are provided in the supplementary material.

## **Results**

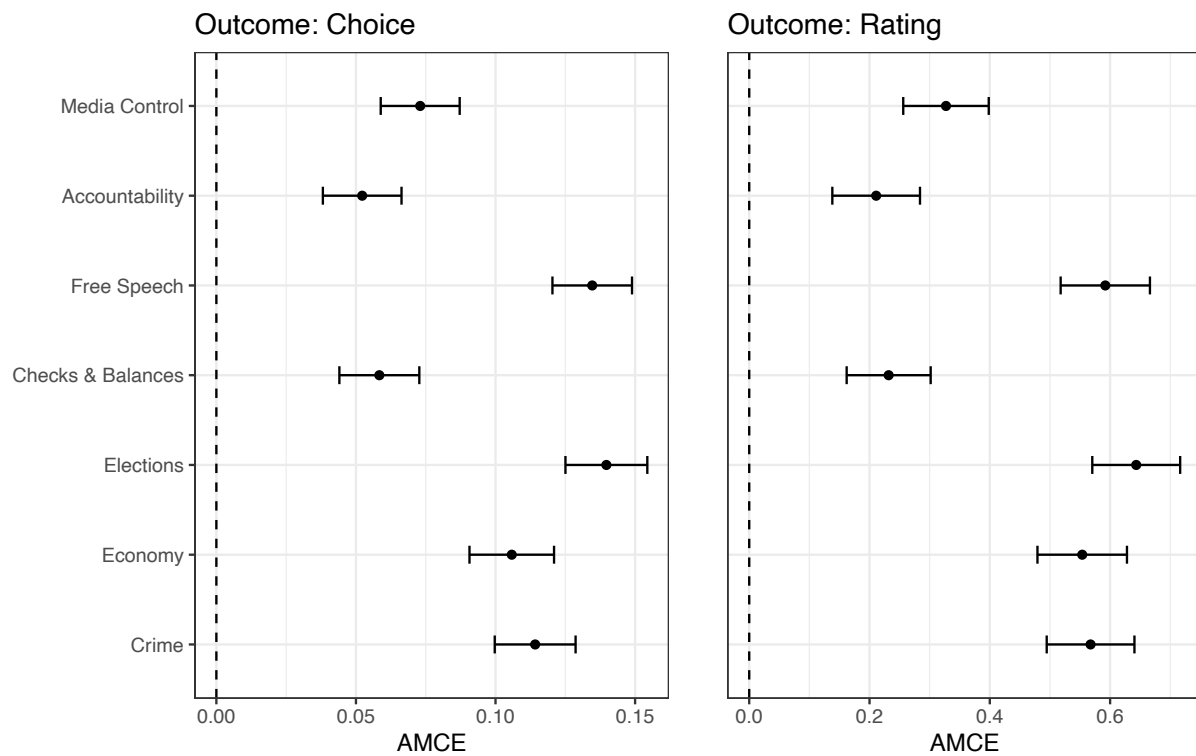
I begin by assessing respondents’ relative preference for different levels of each attribute by

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<sup>10</sup> The AMCEs with respondent-clustered standard errors were computed using the *estimatr* package (Blair et al., 2024). All analyses were made in R version 4.4.1 (2024-06-14).

computing Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs). Figure 2 presents the AMCEs using the pooled sample for both the choice outcome (whether a card was selected) and rating outcome (the individual rating of each card). As we can see, both the economy and crime are important attributes, with differences in the levels of these attributes yielding, on average, a 10.6 and 11.4 percentage point difference in the probability of a society being selected respectively. Similarly, elections and free speech stand out as influential attributes. I find that respondents are, on average, 14 less likely to select a society when elections are unfair and 13.4 percentage points less likely to select a society when the government restricts freedom of speech.

**Figure 2.** Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs)



*Note:* AMCEs computed from OLS regressions with respondent-clustered standard errors ( $N = 18,186$ ). Full estimates are presented in the supplementary material. For the choice outcome, estimates represent the change in the probability of selecting a card with the specific level of each attribute. For the rating outcome, estimates represent the shift in the mean value of the rating scale for a card with the specific level of each attribute.

Moving to media freedom, checks and balances, and executive accountability, I find smaller yet still significant effects. Respectively, these three attributes are responsible for 7.3, 5.8, and 5.3 percentage point differences in the probability that a card is selected. These AMCEs indicate that

citizens place lower intrinsic value on these three attributes. Nevertheless, these attributes still matter and have a consequential impact on the likelihood that a respondent will select a card. Moreover, we can observe by comparing the left and right panels of the figure that the results of the conjoint are consistent across the choice and rating outcomes, indicating consistency among respondents' card selections and their rating for each card.

### **Estimating willingness to trade different dimensions of democracy**

To recall, I hypothesized that individuals would differ in their willingness to trade distinct dimensions of democracy for better economic conditions and lower crime rates. More specifically, *Hypothesis 1* laid down the expectation that respondents would be less willing to trade elections and civil liberties and *Hypothesis 2* posited that they would be more willing to trade checks and balances and political accountability. To test these hypotheses, I estimate the valuation of democracy-related attributes relative to the economic and crime attributes using WTP analyses (AMCE ratios). WTP estimates tell us how much respondents value changes in democracy-related attributes relative to a unit change in economic conditions or crime rates (change in level of these attributes). For example, if the WTP estimate for elections is 1.5, it implies that respondents value an improvement in elections 1.5 times as much as an improvement in the economy or crime. As such, estimates larger than 1 indicate that the attribute is more important than the attribute it is being compared to (economy or crime). Estimates below 1 indicate that the attribute is less important, and lastly, estimates equal to 1 indicate that the attributes are equally important.

Table 7 presents the WTP estimates relative to the economy for the pooled sample and for each country sample. The results demonstrate that only elections and free speech are more valued than the economy, with estimates of 1.13 and 1.04. The remaining three democratic attributes are all perceived as less important relative to the economy, with respondents valuing check and

balance 0.41 times and political accountability 0.37 times as much as an improvement in the economy. As for media freedom, it fares marginally better than the executive aggrandizement attributes but still sits low with an average valuation of 0.58 times compared to an improvement in the economy.

**Table 7.** Willingness to Pay (WTP) for better economy (using rating outcome)

	<b>Pooled Sample</b> ( <i>N</i> = 3,033)	<b>Australia</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,005)	<b>Canada</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,002)	<b>United Kingdom</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,026)
<b>Elections</b>	1.13*** (0.103)	1.19*** (0.019)	1.48*** (0.020)	0.90*** (0.018)
<b>Checks &amp; Balances</b>	0.41*** (0.070)	0.33*** (0.018)	0.58*** (0.018)	0.37*** (0.017)
<b>Political Accountability</b>	0.37*** (0.072)	0.51*** (0.018)	0.37*** (0.018)	0.29*** (0.017)
<b>Media Freedom</b>	0.58*** (0.077)	0.68*** (0.018)	0.76*** (0.019)	0.39*** (0.017)
<b>Free Speech</b>	1.04*** (0.099)	1.23*** (0.019)	1.20*** (0.019)	0.83*** (0.018)

*Note:* Entries are ratios of AMCEs with delta method standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

These results are consistent in both Australia and Canada, but differences subsist in the United Kingdom, where no democracy-related attributes are as important as the economy.<sup>11</sup> In other words, improvements in the economy are, on average, more important to British respondents than any specific dimension of democracy included in the conjoint. This is in contrast to Australia and Canada, where respondents value elections and free speech more than the economy. With that said, the differences in the relative valuation across the five democratic dimensions still holds in the UK. While they may value the economy more than anything else, British respondents still place higher value on elections and free speech compared to the other democracy attributes, with

<sup>11</sup> The United Kingdom may stand-out due to more negative perceptions of the economy. Additional analyses and details are provided on the differences in preferences for the economy between countries in the supplementary material.

elections and free speech being valued as 0.90 and 0.83 times as important as improvements in the economy respectively.

Table 8 presents the WTP estimates relative to improvements in the crime attribute (i.e., lower crime rates). The results closely resemble those for the economy attribute, with elections and free speech both being deemed more important relative to improvements in crime rates in the pooled sample (1.16 and 1.07 times more important respectively). Media freedom follows in the order of importance but still is not deemed as important as lower crime rates (0.59 times as important). Lastly, checks and balances as well as political accountability are the least important attributes with respondents valuing them 0.41 and 0.38 times as important as improvements in crime respectively.

**Table 8.** Willingness to Pay (WTP) for lower crime rates (using rating outcome)

	<b>Pooled Sample</b> ( <i>N</i> = 3,033)	<b>Australia</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,005)	<b>Canada</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,002)	<b>United Kingdom</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,026)
<b>Elections</b>	1.16*** (0.098)	1.12*** (0.019)	1.22*** (0.020)	1.05*** (0.018)
<b>Checks &amp; Balances</b>	0.41*** (0.068)	0.31*** (0.018)	0.48*** (0.018)	0.44*** (0.017)
<b>Political Accountability</b>	0.38*** (0.069)	0.48*** (0.018)	0.31*** (0.018)	0.34*** (0.017)
<b>Media Freedom</b>	0.59*** (0.073)	0.63*** (0.018)	0.62*** (0.019)	0.46*** (0.017)
<b>Free Speech</b>	1.07*** (0.095)	1.15*** (0.019)	0.99 (0.019)	0.97* (0.018)

*Note:* Entries are ratios of AMCEs with delta method standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Again, these results are mostly consistent across the three countries in the sample, with the exception of the free speech attribute. While free speech is deemed more important relative to lower crime rates, this democratic attribute is deemed equally as important as improvement in crime in Canada and the United Kingdom (the non-significance of the estimates confirms they both do not statistically differ from 1, meaning they are equally important).

Overall, these findings partly support my hypotheses. In line with my expectations, I find that individuals value different dimensions of democracy differently and therefore are less likely to trade those dimensions they value more in exchange for better economic and physical security. Particularly, I find that elections and free speech are highly valued attributes of democracy and that citizens value these dimensions more than gains in the economic and physical security domain (therefore less likely to trade these aspects of democracy). With that said, the WTP analyses reveal that media freedom is not as important as hypothesized, with respondents placing lower value on this attribute in comparison to both the economy and crime rates. Nonetheless, the results confirm that media freedom is still relatively more important than both checks and balances and political accountability. In fact, *Hypothesis 2* is supported by the findings, with the executive-related dimensions being those citizens are most likely to trade in exchange for better economic conditions and lower crime rates.

These findings highlight the conditional nature of support for democratic principles. While respondents value all aspects of democracy (as the AMCEs demonstrate), they weigh these values against perceived material benefits, prioritizing foundational principles like elections and speech rights slightly more than governance-related attributes such as checks and balances and political accountability. This not only reflects the pressures that economic and security concerns can place on citizens but also highlights the prioritization of distinct dimensions of democracy.

In accordance with the preregistration and analysis plan, I conduct a series of subgroup analyses and interaction models. More specifically, I examine differences in AMCEs based on respondents' self-reported economic condition and their perceptions of crime. I also examine whether citizens' preferences differ if their political party is in power or not. The results of these analyses reveal no substantial heterogeneity in the results of the conjoint experiment. The

hypotheses are reaffirmed by these additional analyses, which are available in the supplementary material.

## **Discussion**

At the citizen level, this research has important implications for fostering pro-democratic attitudes and behaviors. The findings suggest that citizens' concerns about economic and physical security create vulnerabilities that authoritarian-leaning leaders can exploit to enact undemocratic policies without facing electoral consequences. When such policies successfully deliver economic stability or reduce crime, citizens may even reward these leaders at the polls, thereby reinforcing the cycle of democratic erosion (Mols & Jetten, 2016).

The findings of this study also have implications for our understanding of democratic backsliding at the elite level, providing a sound mechanism to explain why some would-be autocrats succeed at eroding democracy and others face tougher challenges. Indeed, some agents of democratic erosion may be struggling more due to the institution of democracy they are attacking. This is particularly true in light of the results of my experiment, which demonstrate that public tolerance for democratic erosion is not likely to be equal based on the dimensions of democracy being targeted. For example, cases of democratic backsliding in countries like Hungary and Turkey illustrate how leaders that target more vulnerable institutions (i.e., those deemed less important by citizens) can succeed at gradually eroding democracy without provoking significant resistance from the public (Şaşmaz et al., 2022; Wunsch & Gessler, 2023).

At the institutional level, the study underscores the importance of building more resilient democracies by strengthening the institutions that citizens are less likely to prioritize under conditions of insecurity. Indeed, my findings echo the cautions expressed by Nyhan and Titunik

(2024), who argue that interventions targeting public opinion must be paired with institutional reforms that incentivize political actors to respect democratic norms and principles. This is particularly true, as this pre-registered experiment demonstrates, for institutions like checks and balances and political accountability mechanisms. Public opinion alone, even if pro-democratic, is insufficient to halt or reverse democratic erosion, particularly when would-be autocrats leverage improvements to the economy and being tough on crime. Instead, robust institutional safeguards must accompany shifts in public sentiment to ensure that political actors remain bound by democratic rules. In other words, it is crucial to implement fail-safe institutions that do not rely solely on citizens' ability to check undemocratic politicians. This approach could help mitigate the risk of democratic backsliding by ensuring that even under economic or security pressures, when citizens are more likely to tolerate backsliding, key democratic safeguards remain intact.

The results of this conjoint experiment make a significant contribution to the literature by directly engaging with and expanding the recent, foundational work of Adserà et al. (2023) and Neundorf et al. (2024). My study was designed to explicitly adopt and extend the methodological and theoretical framework established by these scholars.

First, I build on their core methodological approach. My work corroborates their crucial finding: when improvements in material and physical security are on offer, citizens demonstrate a willingness to accept undemocratic practices and institutions. I employ a realistic conjoint experiment, similar to that used by Neundorf et al. (2024), that incorporates actual levels of democratic erosion observed around the world, confirming that such trade-offs are not just theoretical but grounded in tangible dynamics.

Second, and most critically, this study expands their theoretical framework by testing the *multidimensional* nature of these trade-offs. While prior work (Adserà et al., 2023; Neundorf et

al., 2024) compellingly establishes *that* citizens make these trade-offs, my study disaggregates the concept of “democracy” to ask *where* citizens are most willing to compromise. The findings herein demonstrate that this willingness is not uniform. Crucially, my study adds this nuance by revealing that citizens are more inclined to forgo constraints on the executive and political accountability than they are to relinquish core democratic elements like elections and free speech. In other words, I find that citizens are more open to tolerate the erosion of democratic institutions or processes that affect them less and are perceived as less central. Conversely, people are less likely to let go of dimensions they deem consequential for democracy (i.e., greater perceived utility and importance).

This more granular finding provides empirical support for Levitsky and Ziblatt’s (2018) argument on the gradual erosion of democracy. The nuanced nature of these findings offers a potential explanation for why successful democratic erosion efforts often begin with the degradation of institutions that citizens are least likely to protect, such as checks and balances or mechanisms of executive accountability (Grillo et al., 2024).

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## Supplementary Material

### Research Ethics and Preregistration

This study was approved by the University of Ottawa's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board (Project # S-09-24-10057) and complies with both the *Tri-Council Policy Statement 2* (TCPS-2) as well as APSA's *Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research*. The experiment was made possible through funding by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Canada and the author received additional research funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. There are no known conflicts of interests to disclose. The study did not include any form of deception: participants were fully aware they were taking part in a scientific study and provided their informed consent.

Participants were recruited through the market research platform Qualtrics between 28 November 2024 and 5 December 2024. To be eligible, respondents had to be citizens of Australia, Canada or the United Kingdom. All participants were fairly compensated at Qualtrics' pre-established rate of \$2.10 (based on hourly rate of \$15.75 for an average survey completion time of 8 minutes). Once a person had received and accepted an invitation to participate, they were routed to a survey mounted on the Qualtrics platform. This survey included three sections: a sociodemographic questionnaire, a political attitudes survey and the conjoint experiment. The material, hypotheses, and analysis plan were preregistered on the Open Science Framework (OSF) before the collection of any data.

The preregistration plan is available online here: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/8Q46K>. The data and replication code are also available online on the OSF project page (<https://osf.io/vmbr9/>).

### **Deviations from preregistration**

The preregistration plan includes four hypotheses, but only two are presented in the manuscript. This was done for the sake of brevity and because the two unreported hypotheses do not make any substantial additions to the article as it stands. With that said, I report the results of the hypothesis tests for these two hypotheses (labelled 3 and 4 in the PAP) in Appendix D of the present document.

*Hypothesis 3* predicted that individuals in a precarious economic condition will be more likely to trade all dimension of democracy in exchange for better material security when compared to those in better economic conditions. Meanwhile, *Hypothesis 4* predicted that individuals who perceive greater crime rates in their communities will be more likely to trade all dimension of democracy in exchange for better physical security when compared to those who perceive lower levels of crime.

### **Manipulation check**

As a manipulation check, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which changes to each of the dimensions in the conjoint would affect them on a scale from 0 = *would not affect me* to 10 = *would affect me a lot*. This question was asked after all three conjoint tasks were completed and will only be used to verify the underlying importance respondents assign to each dimension of democracy included in the experiment.

There are no clear distinguishable differences in respondent's answers to this manipulation check items. This is not surprising since the answers were asked at the end of the survey and respondents may have incurred response fatigue and answered equally on all manipulation checks. The validity of the conjoint remains unaffected by this manipulation check.

## Conjoint experiment design

Each participant was tasked with choosing between two hypothetical country profiles that randomly vary on seven key dimensions: economic condition, crime rates, electoral integrity, voting rights, constraints on the executive, political accountability, and free speech. The specific attribute levels are presented in the main text, and an example of a conjoint task is presented in Figure S1 below.

**Figure S1.** Example of conjoint task

\*Please carefully read the two profiles and choose which of the two societies you consider to be the best one for you; that is, the society in which you would be the most content.

Society A	Society B
<b>Economy:</b> People generally live comfortably on their income and can afford most things they need.	<b>Economy:</b> People generally live comfortably on their income and can afford most things they need.
<b>Crime:</b> Crime rates in the country are low and stable.	<b>Crime:</b> The country struggles with high crime rates.
<b>Elections:</b> Citizens elect their leaders in free and fair elections.	<b>Elections:</b> Citizens elect their leaders in free and fair elections.
<b>Media:</b> Media organizations are free and not influenced by the government.	<b>Media:</b> Media organizations are free and not influenced by the government.
<b>Checks and Balances:</b> The prime minister is constrained by parliament and courts.	<b>Checks and Balances:</b> The prime minister is constrained by parliament and courts.
<b>Accountability:</b> Political leaders who have a majority of support are not protected from criminal investigations and prosecution.	<b>Accountability:</b> Political leaders who have a majority of support are protected from criminal prosecution.
<b>Free Speech:</b> People could get prosecuted by authorities when criticizing the government in public.	<b>Free Speech:</b> People can criticize the government in public without getting prosecuted by authorities.

Society A       Society B

## Sample composition and balance tests

Country-level representative samples were ensured using recruitment quotas based on the latest

available census data. The samples for Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom are therefore representative of the population for gender, age, and region. Details on the specific quota numbers used are available on the OSF preregistration page [LINK HIDDEN FOR PEER-REVIEW].

To ensure the three country samples are well balanced, I compute the standardized mean difference. The standardized mean difference (SMD) is a measure used to assess the balance of a variable between two or more groups, in this case the different country samples. It standardizes the difference in means to account for variability, making it easier to compare balance across variables measured on different scales. The results of SMD are presented in the Table S1 below. Note that SMD values below 0.1 typically indicate good balance between groups. Based on this cutoff, the balance tests reveal no imbalance between the samples collected in the three countries.

**Table S9.** Standardized mean difference (SMD) test

	<b>Australia</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,005)	<b>Canada</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,002)	<b>United Kingdom</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,026)	<b>SMD</b>
<b>Age</b>	46.87 (17.85)	46.15 (16.53)	46.41 (17.57)	0.027
<b>Gender</b>	462 (46.1)	439 (43.9)	490 (47.9)	0.054
<b>Education</b>	1.97 (0.77)	2.05 (0.74)	2.06 (0.79)	0.078

*Note:* For age, entries are the mean with standard deviation in parentheses. For gender, entries are the number of male respondents with the percentage of male respondents in parentheses. For education, entries are the mean with standard deviation in parentheses.

### Survey Measures

Prior to completing the conjoint tasks, respondents answered a sociodemographic questionnaire. This included providing their age, gender, province/region of residence, education level, and household income. In addition to this questionnaire, participants completed several political attitudes measures, including left-right political orientation, perception of economic condition, and

perception of physical security. The complete details of these measures, including question wording, can be found in the supplementary material.

### **Survey questions**

Below is a list of survey questions used to measure the many variables used in this study. These range from sociodemographic indicators to scales of political attitudes.

**AGE:** How old are you? [dropdown list from 18 to 99]

**GENDER:** How do you describe yourself?

- d. Male
- e. Female
- f. You do not have an option that applies to me. I identify as: [fill-in]

**EDUCATION:** What is the highest level of education you have completed? If still a student, please mark the current level of education.

- d. Secondary school or lower
- e. Further education (academic or vocational, including undergraduate studies)
- f. Higher education (professional degree, master's or doctorate)

**IDEOLOGY:** In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?

**PARTY ID:** Do you generally think of yourself as a little closer to one of the political parties than the others? If yes, which party? [country-specific political party dropdown list]

**ECONOMIC CONDITION:** Which of the following comes closest to how you feel about your household's income nowadays?

- d. Living comfortably on present income
- e. Challenging to live on present income
- f. Very difficult to live on present income

**PERCEPTION OF CRIME:** How would you rate the current level of crime in your community? [0 – very low; to 5 – very high].

### Calculation details for AMCEs

The Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) quantifies the causal effect of a specific attribute level on the outcome of interest (choice or rating), averaged across all levels of the other attributes. In this research, it is computed within the framework of a fully randomized conjoint design, which ensures that the estimates represent causal effects.

For the binary choice outcome, the AMCEs are estimated using a conditional logistic regression model. The model is specified as:

$$\Pr(\textit{selected} = 1|X) = \frac{\exp(X\beta)}{1 + \exp(X\beta)}$$

Where  $X$  is a matrix of dummy variables representing the levels of the attributes and  $\beta$  is the vector of coefficients associated with each attribute level. In this case, the AMCE for an attribute level ( $x_k$ ) is given by the marginal effect:

$$AMCE(x_k) = \beta_k$$

This represents the average change in the probability of a card being selected when the level of attribute ( $x$ ) changes to ( $x_k$ ), holding all other attributes constant. The AMCEs in this study were all measured with the democratic backsliding level as the reference category ( $x_k = \text{democratic level}$ ).

For the continuous rating outcome, a linear regression model is used:

$$\textit{rating}_i = X_i\beta + \epsilon_i$$

Where  $X_i$  is a matrix of dummy variables for the attributes,  $\beta$  represents the effect of each attribute level on the rating, and  $\epsilon_i$  is the error term. For the rating models, the AMCE for an attribute level ( $x_k$ ) is directly represented by the estimated coefficient ( $\beta$ ), which reflects the average change in the rating when the attribute level changes to ( $x_k$ ).

## Full AMCE estimates

The full AMCE estimates plotted in Figure 1 of the main text are presented in Table 1 below. Details regarding the calculations of the AMCEs and corresponding robust standard errors are available in the previous section of this document.

**Table S10.** AMCEs for choice and rating outcomes

	Choice Outcome	Rating Outcome
(Intercept)	0.162*** (0.010)	3.573*** (0.066)
Economy	0.106*** (0.008)	0.554*** (0.038)
Crime	0.114*** (0.007)	0.568*** (0.037)
Elections	0.140*** (0.007)	0.643*** (0.037)
Executive	0.058*** (0.007)	0.232*** (0.036)
Law	0.052*** (0.007)	0.211*** (0.037)
Media	0.073*** (0.007)	0.327*** (0.036)
Free Speech	0.135*** (0.007)	0.592*** (0.038)
<i>N</i>	18,198	18,198
R <sup>2</sup>	0.072	0.066
RMSE	0.48	2.36

*Note.* The reference category for each attribute is the democratic backsliding level. AMCE estimates with respondent-clustered robust standard errors in parentheses.

## Power analysis

With an effective sample size of 18,198 observations (3,033 respondents in a 3x2 design), seven conjoint levels, and an alpha-level of 0.05, I am able to capture an Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) of 0.07 with 99.90% power. At the country-level, I am able to capture an AMCE of 0.07 with 82.85% power. These power analyses were computed using the ‘cjpowR’ package in R (Schuessler and Freitag, 2020).

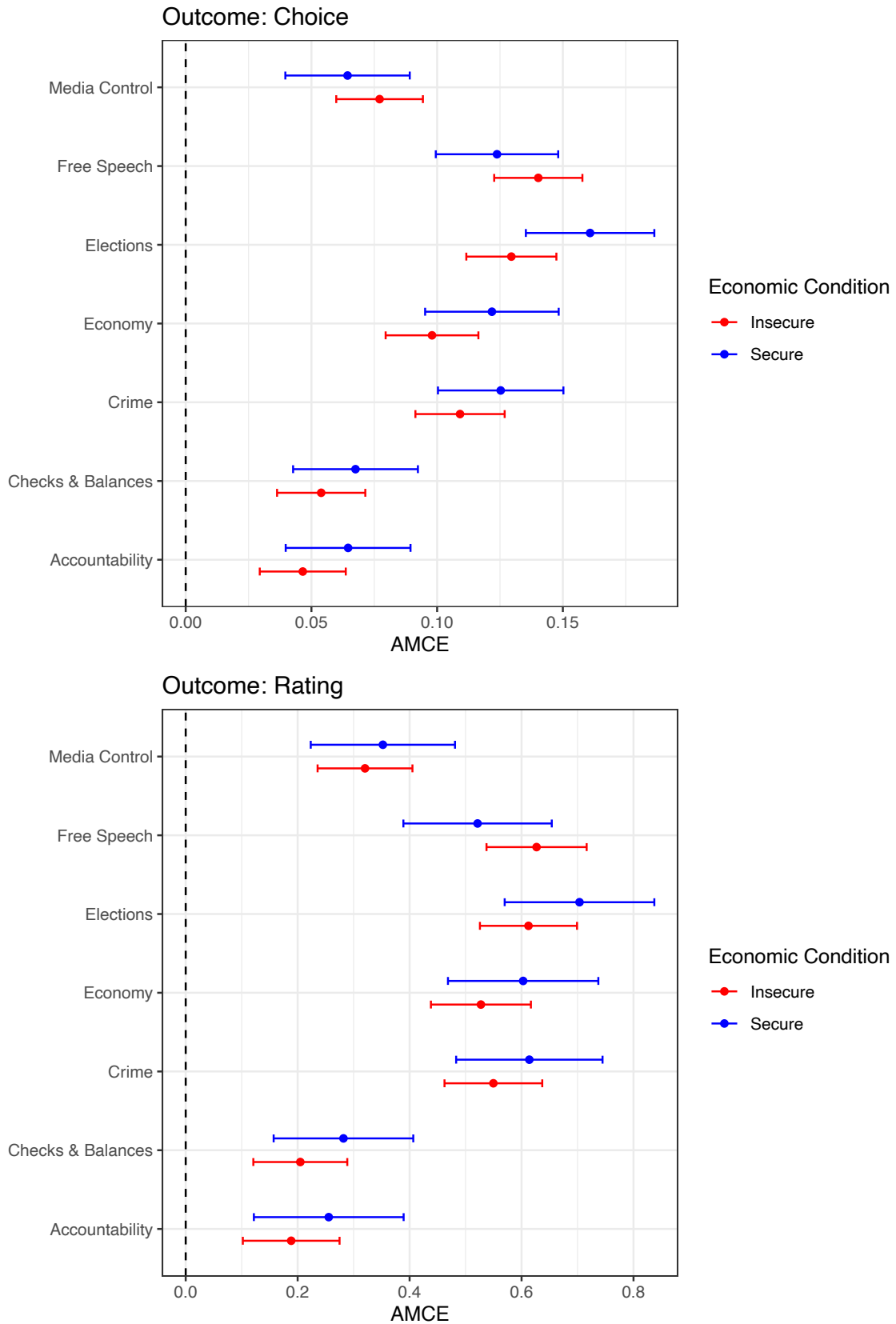
### **Subgroup analyses and country-level models**

Lastly, I explore heterogeneity in preferences across respondents' country of origin. To do so, I estimate AMCEs separately for each country to observe any cross-national differences in attribute importance. I report all AMCEs grouped by country with full models included in the supplementary material. As mentioned, I compute all models with respondent-clustered standard errors to address potential dependencies within responses from the same individual.

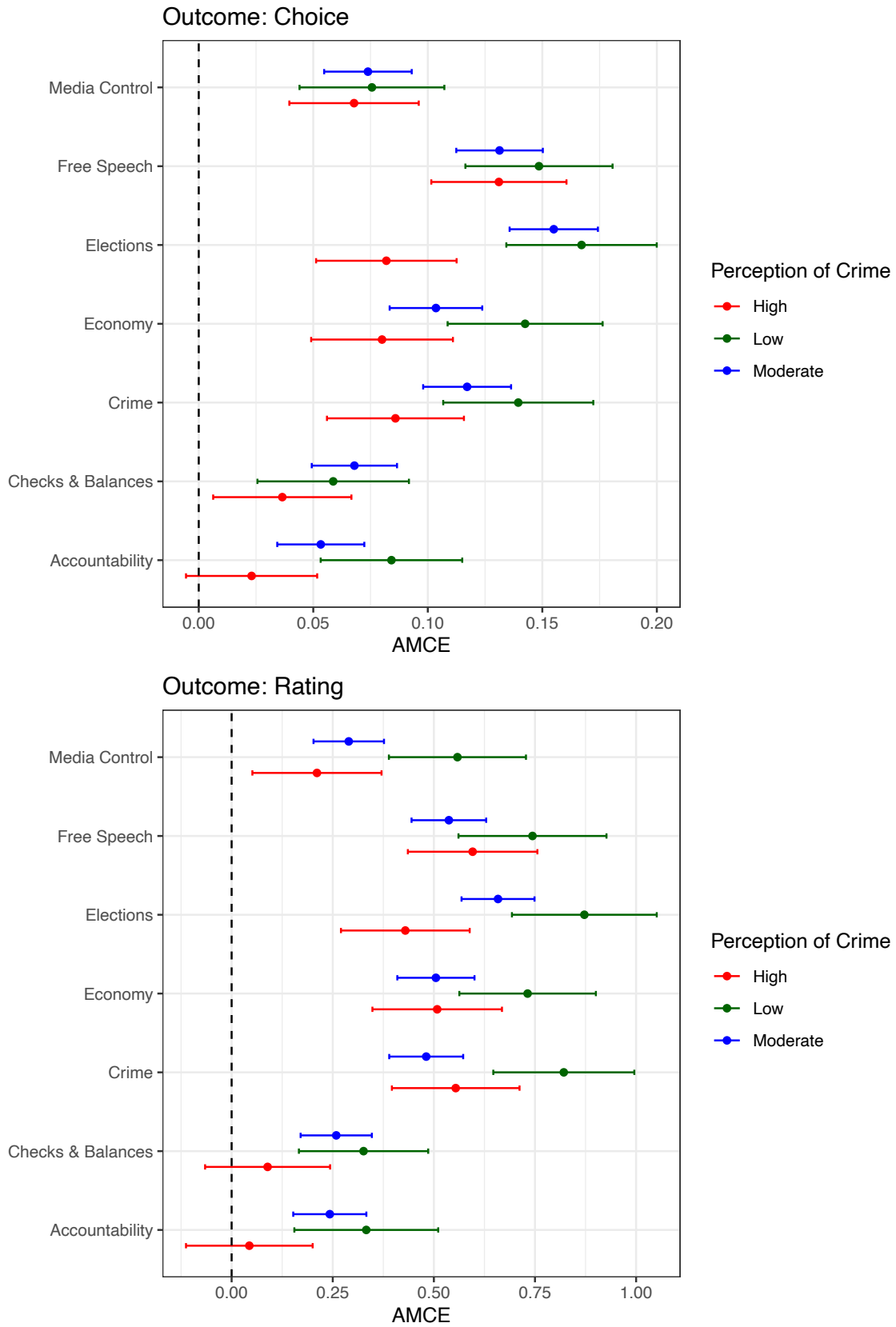
Figure S2 presents the AMCEs for both the choice and rating outcome based on self-reported economic condition. As we can see from the figure, respondents do not substantially differ in their preferences based on economic conditions. Those who feel insecure financially report similar preferences for a strong economy when compared to those who are secure. Similar findings are found for the different democracy attributes.

Figure S3 presents the AMCEs for both the choice and rating outcome based on perceptions of crime in one's community. As we can see from the figure, respondents who perceive high levels of crime in their communities have lower preferences for most of the attributes in the conjoint, with the exception of free speech and media control. These are interesting findings, although they do not clearly confirm hypotheses 3 and 4. Further research must be conducted to unravel the role of individual economic conditions and crime perceptions on the democratic trade-off framework.

**Figure S2.** AMCEs for choice and rating outcome based on self-reported economic condition



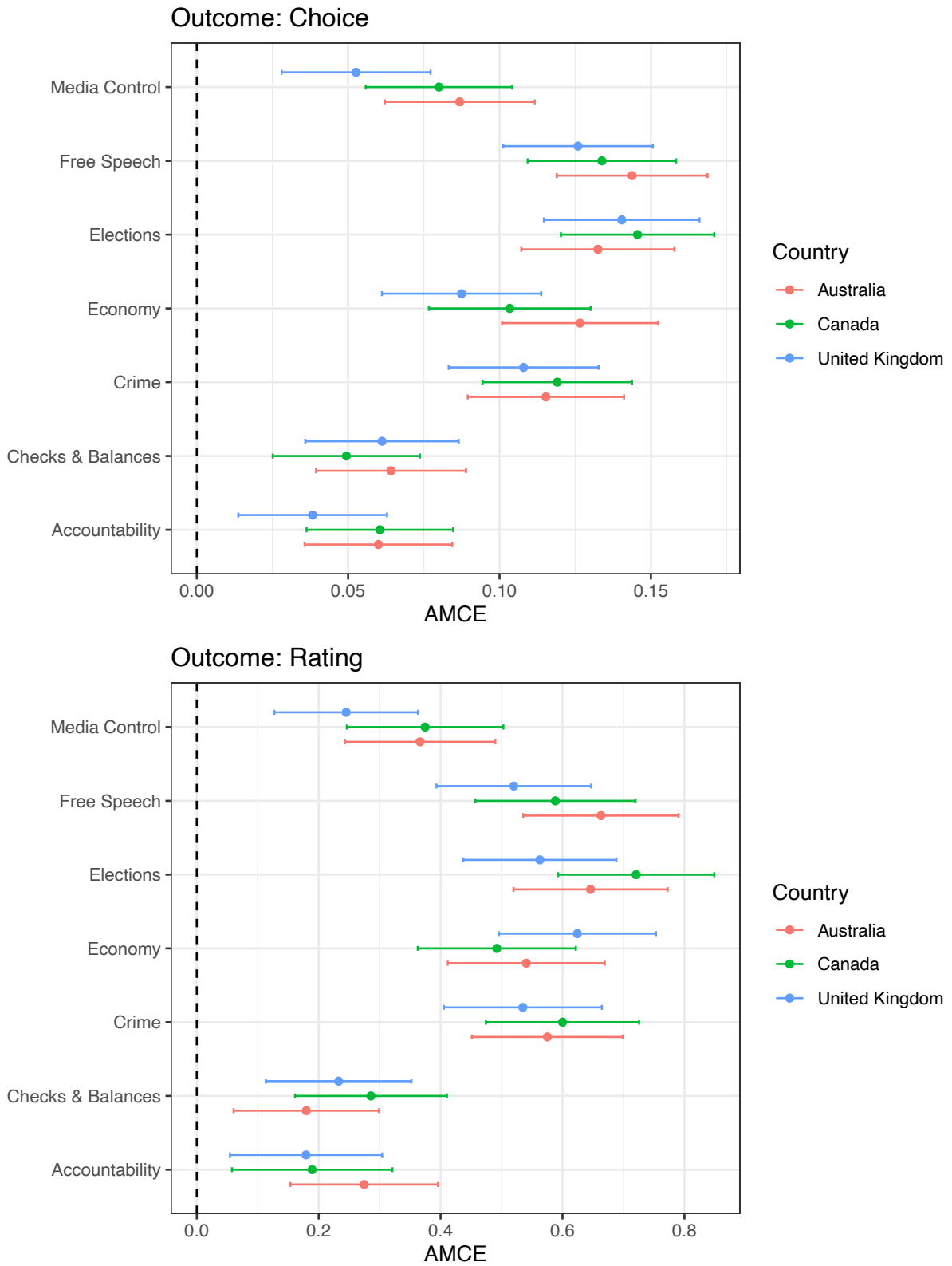
**Figure S3.** AMCEs for choice and rating outcome based on perceived crime rates



Lastly, Figure S4 presents the AMCEs for both the choice and rating outcome based for each country individually. As mentioned in the main text, the results do not substantially differ across country but are rather stable. This indicates a certain degree of consistency in citizens' preferences across stable democracies (at least those included in the study). With that said, however, respondents from the United Kingdom seem to place lower importance on a strong economy compared to those in Australia (and somewhat compared to those in Canada). These differences may stem from measurement error, but it is more likely that UK respondents simply value a strong economy less as a core societal value because their economy is already strong (at least comparatively to that of Australia and Canada).

While these small differences occur (see Figure S4), I do not feel as though they prevent the use of pooled data in the main text, nor do I believe these differences invalidate the results of pooled analyses. The findings presented in the main document remain valid and are certainly generalizable across the three cases. This is certainly reinforced by the fact that the preferences of citizens, while they may vary in strength, remain in the same direction and similar relative standing in all three countries. To put it simply, no country is an outlier, and differences outlined above constitute only small differences that may not have significant empirical or theoretical value.

**Figure S4.** AMCEs for choice and rating outcome by country



## **Chapter 6: Young Citizens and the Democratic Disconnect**

### **Abstract**

Recent scholarship has highlighted growing concerns about the erosion of democratic norms and values, particularly among younger citizens. This research agenda remains ambiguous, however, especially regarding the extent to which young people's democratic disconnect results in a shift towards undemocratic politics. In this research, I rely on a multi-method approach to examine differences in democratic attitudes across age groups. Using observational and experimental data, I provide robust cross-national evidence that younger citizens' support for democracy is substantially lower than older citizens. Building on these findings, I further demonstrate that youth are far more tolerant of a wide range of undemocratic practices and democratic norm violations. Lastly, I present the results of a conjoint experiment which confirms that younger citizens have significantly lower preferences for democratic societal attributes when compared to their older counterparts. Substantively, these findings contribute to a growing literature on the vulnerability of consolidated democracies to younger peoples' shifting attitudes towards democratic institutions and norms.

## Introduction

Amid growing threats of democratic backsliding and deconsolidation, the puzzle of youth support for democracy has become increasingly urgent. Recent data indicate that younger citizens are rapidly gravitating towards illiberal parties that promote anti-democratic ideologies. In a 2024 survey conducted in France, 32 percent of individuals aged 18 to 25 expressed support for the far-right *Rassemblement National*, while 17 percent favoured the far-left *La France Insoumise* (Cokelaere, 2024). Similarly, during the 2024 European Parliament elections in Germany, more young voters cast their ballots for the illiberal populist *Alternativ für Deutschland* (AfD) than for any other political party (Pfeifer, 2024).

These emerging patterns highlight the presence of a democratic disconnect among the youth in consolidated democracies, raising questions regarding young citizens' shifting societal and democratic norms. Yet, scholars are disputed on the meaning of these trends among democracies' youngest members. Some argue that young people have grown tired of democracy for performative reasons, but that this tiredness has not affected their democratic aspirations (Claassen & Magalhães, 2023; Foa & Mounk, 2016; Norris, 2011). More recently, however, some scholars have raised concerns regarding younger citizens' commitment to democracy, calling into question the commonly-held premise that a growing democratic disconnect is not necessarily fueling a shift towards undemocratic and illiberal alternatives (Foa & Mounk, 2019; Frederiksen, 2024; Huttunen & Saikkonen, 2023). This nascent literature has yet to systematically investigate—in consolidated and stable democracies—the extent to which younger citizens' attitudes towards democracy reflect a shift towards undemocratic politics.

In this article, I use a multi-method approach to examine differences in democratic attitudes across age groups, focusing particularly on the views of younger citizens towards democracy and

undemocratic practices. I examine this question through two observational studies and one experimental study. In the first study, I demonstrate that support for democracy as a regime type is indeed lower among younger respondents and increases steadily across age groups. This relationship is approximately linear, and effect sizes are large.

Turning to undemocratic politics, Study 2 reveals that youth are more tolerant of a wide range of undemocratic practices and democratic norm violations when compared to older age groups. More specifically, I find that young people are more supportive of practices such as executive aggrandizement, voter suppression, electoral fraud, and the elimination of political accountability mechanisms to name but a few. Lastly, Study 3 presents the results of a conjoint experiment which provides causal evidence that younger citizens have significantly lower preferences for democratic attributes when compared to their older counterparts. Most noteworthy, I find that young people have virtually no distinguishable preference for the presence or absence of executive checks and balances in society. This unique conjoint experiment design offers a causal confirmation in support of the observational analyses.

Substantively, this research provides robust evidence that citizens from younger age groups are less supportive of democracy and increasingly tolerant of undemocratic practices. In doing so, this research complements previous works on youth and democracy, most notably by demonstrating that fears of a shift towards illiberal and undemocratic politics are becoming a reality in some of the most stable and consolidated democracies in the world (Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States) (see Foa & Mounk, 2019). It also goes to show that young citizens' negative attitudes towards democracy are accompanied by a shift to undemocratic politics. If unaddressed, this shift away from democratic norms has the potential to become a crucial determinant in the "slow death" of democracies worldwide (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

## Youth and democracy

The question of whether younger generations are less supportive of democracy than older cohorts has been the subject of considerable debate in political science. As democracies worldwide face mounting challenges from illiberal and populist movements, understanding generational differences in democratic support has become increasingly urgent. In their seminal article on youth and democracy, Foa and Mounk (2019, p. 5) contend that younger people are particularly vulnerable to the rising tide of illiberalism, suggesting that youth have become increasingly disenchanted with democracy as a political system. In a similar vein, Claassen and Magalhães (2023) demonstrate that support for democracy has decreased generationally in the United States, with little evidence of life-cycle decreases to counter-balance these cohort-level shifts.

Some evidence, however, complicates this commonly held narrative. Indeed, recent research finds important nuances in patterns of democratic support, questioning the extent to which younger citizens deviate from their older counterparts in their commitment to democratic principles (Wuttke et al., 2022). Moreover, several scholars have outright rejected the claim that youth are less democratic. For instance, Alexander and Welzel (2017) argue that being raised in democratic contexts has made younger cohorts equally or more supportive of democracy, challenging the assumption that generational divides are a primary driver of contemporary democratic erosion (see also Norris, 2017).

As exemplified by these diverging perspectives, there remains significant empirical ambiguity in our understanding of how support for democracy and tolerance for undemocratic practices vary across age cohorts. Much of the existing literature focuses on abstract attitudes toward democracy broadly defined, often overlooking how individuals respond to specific undemocratic practices that erode democratic norms and institutions (see, for example, Foa &

Mounk, 2019; Wuttke et al., 2022). With that said, developments in several key political science literatures—including representation, democratic governance, and populism—can help in understanding potential differences in support for democracy across cohorts. More precisely, the reality of key institutional and government performance can help shine a light on why young people may be turning away from democracy.

One such institutional reality which may fuel younger peoples' disconnect with democracy is their underrepresentation from crucial democratic institutions and processes. Stockemer and Sundstrom (2022) as well as Stockemer and Kolodziejczyk (2024) document the systematic underrepresentation of young adults in parliaments, cabinets, and candidacies. Using a sample of more than 131 national parliaments, Stockemer and Sundstrom (2022) find that the average share of parliamentarians aged 35 and younger is a mere 9.35 percent, despite this age group making up more than 30 percent of the global population. The authors also note that youth representation in national parliaments “has not improved in the past 20 or 30 years, regardless of how we measure it” (Stockemer & Sundstrom, 2022, p. 48). In fact, the average parliamentarian is slightly older today than at the beginning of the century. In executive offices, the underrepresentation of young adults is even worse. Across France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, Stockemer and Sundström (2021) find that adults aged 35 and below make up just about 1 percent of cabinet positions over the last 40 years. Expanding the age group to those 40 or younger, that figure increases to a meager 7 percent.

This well-documented lack of representation is linked to feelings of alienation and disempowerment among youth and reinforces the perception that democratic institutions are unresponsive to younger generations' needs (Blazina & Desilver, 2021, 2023; Stockemer et al., 2023). In many cases, the voices of younger generations are overshadowed by those of older

policymakers, who may prioritize issues that do not resonate with youth concerns (Kurz et al., 2025). This reality is exacerbated by the fact that when they are included in the electoral and partisan political landscape, youth are often used as sacrificial lambs: political candidates selected in districts where their political party is uncompetitive (Gélix & Chassé, 2024; Lawless & Fox, 2015).

Stemming from this underrepresentation, younger individuals may view democracy as ineffective in addressing their needs and concerns, especially in times of crises and uncertainty. Dahl et al. (2020) and Cammaerts et al. (2014) highlight that political passivity and critical attitudes toward the effectiveness of democratic systems are prevalent among European youth. This perception of ineffectiveness is compounded by economic and social insecurities, such as employment instability (Zagórski, 2006), which disproportionately affect young people and may erode their trust in democratic institutions. These economic insecurities often intersect with broader trends of precarious living conditions, where younger individuals face mounting difficulties in accessing housing, healthcare, and access to education (Foa et al., 2020). Such systemic challenges contribute to a growing alienation from democratic processes that are perceived as failing to deliver tangible benefits to the younger demographic.

While these trends have historically been associated with youth through a lifespan approach, recent trends in economic insecurity and democratic crises also highlight a shift to generational effects. Indeed, younger generations are growing up in a period marked by frequent generation-specific crises, including economic recessions, affordability crises, climate change, and global pandemics. These experiences shape their views of governance and democracy, as they are more likely to associate democratic systems with instability and inefficiency, especially in tackling challenges that will disproportionately affect them and future generations (i.e., climate change)

(Sloam et al., 2022). Wuttke et al. (2022) provide evidence that democratic fatigue is more pronounced among younger cohorts in consolidated democracies, reflecting broader sociopolitical shifts. This fatigue is linked to aforementioned grievances and a perceived erosion of trust in political institutions.

In addition to structural representation and democratic legitimacy failures, the rise of populism presents another challenge to democratic support among younger cohorts. Foa and Mounk (2019) argue that populist movements, which often reject democratic norms, have gained significant traction among younger citizens. Körner et al. (2023) add that young people may be more prone to populist ideas, further contributing to their skepticism toward traditional democratic governance. This phenomenon reflects broader trends of political disillusionment and dissatisfaction among younger voters (Pickard, 2019). The appeal of populist narratives lies in their ability to frame traditional democratic institutions as ineffective, corrupt, or out of touch with the needs of ordinary citizens. For many young individuals, populism offers a more immediate and relatable critique of the status quo, even when it undermines democratic principles. It provides a credible justification for the perceived and lived structural deficits of democracy (as exemplified by the underrepresentation of youth and the inability of democracy to deal with various crises).

Younger age groups are also exposed to transnational influences that challenge traditional democratic ideals and reaffirm existing grievances (Lello, 2020). Conspiracy theories are a prime example of such influences, and are particularly damaging considering their demonstrated impact on younger individuals (Bordeleau & Stockemer, 2024). These conspiratorial narratives often complement populist rhetoric, rationalizing democratic grievances and placing the blame on malevolent elites (Castanho Silva et al., 2017). Such narratives are demonstrated to have negative repercussions on key determinants of democratic support, including political trust and populist

attitudes (Bordeleau, 2023; Thórisdóttir et al., 2020). These consequences are particularly substantial for individuals who actively consume political news and are avid social media users (see Mari et al., 2022; Schlipphak et al., 2022).

This discussion of democratic shortcomings for younger citizens provides a foundation upon which we can establish expectations regarding younger people's attitudes towards democracy. More specifically, we can expect citizens from younger age groups to exhibit lower levels of support for democracy than older cohorts. This prediction can be summarized with the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** Younger citizens will be less supportive of democracy when compared to those from older age groups.

More specifically, younger citizens have real and significant grievances with democracy, namely their underrepresentation in decision-making and the ineffectiveness of democracy to solve pressing challenges facing the youth. Coupled with the rise of instant social communication services and transnational influences, it is reasonable to expect a democratic disconnect among younger citizens.

## **From democratic disconnect to undemocratic politics**

The puzzle of generational differences in support for democracy yields important questions about the extent to which younger peoples' critical views may affect democracy by fueling its erosion. Researchers have previously established that critical citizens may actually be healthy for democratic legitimacy and stability by ensuring the evolution of institutions and processes (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 1999). This raises the question, however, of whether being critical of democracy necessarily implies being interested in fixing it. In her re-examination of this topic, Norris (2011,

p. 5) duly notes that critical citizens “aspire to democracy as their ideal form of government, yet at the same time remain deeply skeptical when evaluating how democracy works in their own country.” But at which point does skepticism and grievances affect a citizens’ democratic aspirations altogether. In other words, are democratic grievances and cynicism fueling a shift towards anti-democratic norms and undemocratic practices?

I explore here the possibility that some individuals with grievances grow out of democracy altogether and turn to undemocratic alternatives. In other words, instead of trying to heal their democratic ills, these individuals would be so disillusioned with democracy that they decide to turn to undemocratic solutions. This perspective resembles the distinction between the concepts of democratic apathy and antipathy defined by Foa and Mounk (2019). These authors distinguish between two trends: *democratic apathy* as a general disinterest and low engagement in politics, and *democratic antipathy* as a more active form of support for illiberal, anti-democratic politics.

Existing research provides ambiguous evidence regarding young citizens’ fit in either of these concepts. On one hand, some scholars argue that young people have grown tired of democracy for performative reasons, but that this tiredness has not affected their democratic aspirations, essentially placing them in the democratic apathy category (Claassen & Magalhães, 2023; Foa & Mounk, 2016; Norris, 2011). More recently, however, some scholars have raised concerns regarding younger citizens’ overall commitment to democracy, arguing that a growing democratic disconnect is fueling a shift towards undemocratic and illiberal alternatives (Foa & Mounk, 2019; Frederiksen, 2024; Huttunen & Saikkonen, 2023). This latter view would be consistent with the notion of a democratic antipathy among the youth. Such a perspective would be characterized by individuals who not only lack support for democracy, but also increasingly support and tolerate undemocratic practices; constituting a shift in the norms associated with democratic governance

and citizenship (Howe, 2017; Schnaudt et al., 2024).

Across stable consolidated democracies, there is an argument to be made that younger individuals' disconnect with democracy may be fueling an undemocratic shift. To put it simply, the list of grievances that young people have against democracy may have grown too long and younger generations may no longer view democracy as the form of government best suited to tackle their issues. In addition to the grievances listed in the previous section, the perpetual reminder of these democratic deficiencies through traditional media sources, social media, and increasing transnational populist rhetoric exacerbates the perceptions that existing democratic defects are irreparable (Bartlett, 2014; Berman & Snegovaya, 2019). The idea of turning “disenchantment into politics” is therefore a centre piece of the logic that negative attitudes towards democracy may be leading youth towards undemocratic alternatives (Bartlett, 2014, p. 104).

As previously mentioned, the influence of global movements and social media campaigns advocating for change further complicates younger citizens' relationship with democratic norms. These movements often highlight the failures of democratic systems to address pressing global issues, such as inequality and environmental degradation, leading to a questioning of whether democracy is the most effective framework for achieving social progress (Kitschelt, 2002). Globalization and the spread of authoritarian practices in some regions may create alternative models of governance that seem attractive to young people disillusioned with democracy, countering existing arguments that democratic socialization through upbringing is enough to prevent the undemocratization of the youth (Alexander & Welzel, 2017).

For this argument to bear any significance and validity, we should be able to identify a shift among younger citizens characterized by both more negative attitudes towards democracy and

greater tolerance and support for undemocratic alternatives. This would reflect a move away from traditional liberal democratic norms and institutions. Some recent experimental evidence supports this argument. Most notably, Frederiksen (2024) finds that younger people are more lenient towards undemocratic behaviour compared to older individuals. In a different study, however, Huttunen and Saikkonen (2023) observe that younger citizens in Finland do not necessarily tolerate undemocratic practices more than their older counterparts. Their research raises doubts about the validity of an antipathetic youth argument, but their findings are limited to the Finnish case and narrow in scope (candidate choice experiment). Considering the proposed framework and the mixed empirical evidence, I propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2.** Younger citizens will be more tolerant of undemocratic policies and practices than those from older age groups.

The expectation laid out in *Hypothesis 2* encapsulates the core of the argument proposed in this section; that is, that younger citizens are shifting towards democratic antipathy (i.e., undemocratic practices and illiberalism). Confirming this hypothesis would corroborate the warning put forth by Foa and Mounk (2019), namely that consolidated democracies are not immune to an anti-democratic shift among its youngest citizens. More broadly, evidence of an undemocratic turn among young democratic citizens would raise significant concerns regarding the viability of liberal democracies in the future and have substantial implications for the study of democracy.

## **Research overview**

To empirically assess the hypotheses and arguments put forth in this research, I rely on a multi-method approach and proceed with observational and experimental data. The research leverages

two sources of data: original online survey data collected in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom ( $N = 3,003$ ) as well as novel data from the Election Legitimacy Tracking Survey (ELTS;  $N = 17,707$ ).<sup>12</sup> Data from both sources were collected using convenience sampling through the Qualtrics platform. Responses were collected in December 2024 for the original survey and between August 2024 and January 2025 for the ELTS. More information on data collection and sample composition is available in the supplementary material.

The research proceeds in three tests, each divided into distinct sections, with a general discussion tying the findings together at the end. In Test 1, I examine the first hypothesis and provide cross-national evidence of differences in support for democracy across age groups. Most importantly, I find that the relationship between age and support for democracy is consistent across four consolidated democracies, namely Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This association is approximately linear and effect sizes are substantial. Test 2 turns to the second hypothesis and considers the existence of an undemocratic shift among younger citizens. The results reveal that youth are far more tolerant of a wide range of undemocratic practices and democratic norm violations. These include but are not limited to executive aggrandizement, voter suppression, electoral fraud, and the elimination of political accountability mechanisms.

Lastly, the third test presents the results of a conjoint experiment which provides causal evidence that younger citizens have significantly lower preferences for democratic societal attributes when compared to their older counterparts. This experiment reaffirms the results of the two previous studies by establishing a robust causal confirmation of an undemocratic shift among younger citizens.

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<sup>12</sup> Data from the 2024 ELTS was collected in collaboration with Dr. Rory Truex (Princeton University) and Prof Kevin Arceneaux (Sciences Po) thanks to funding awarded to Dr. Rory Truex. The ELTS was approved by the Princeton University Institutional Review Board. The original online survey (Australia; Canada; and UK) was approved by the University of Ottawa's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board (Project #S-09-24-10057).

## Test 1: Support for democracy

In this first test, I measure differences in support for democracy across respondents' age. To recall, I first hypothesized that citizens from younger cohorts would be less supportive of democracy than their older counterparts. I test this hypothesis with cross-national data from both the original online survey and the ELTS (total  $N = 20,710$ ).

### Measures

As the key independent factor of this research, age was obtained directly from respondents as a numeric variable (ranges from 18 to 100).<sup>13</sup> For these analyses, I treat age as a continuous variable to facilitate both the illustration and interpretation of the results. Categorical models based on the predefined age groups are available in the supplementary material.

The dependent variable—support for democracy—was captured using two different measures. In Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, I used the following item: “Democracy may have its problems, but it is still the best form of government.” Responses were given on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). In the United States (ELTS data), respondents were presented with the following item: “How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?” and answers ranged from *not at all important* (1) to *absolutely important* (5).

In addition to the main independent and dependent variables, respondents answered a sociodemographic questionnaire. This included providing their gender identity, province/region of residence, and education level. Participants also completed several political attitudes measures, including left-right political orientation (partisanship in the United States) and perceptions of

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<sup>13</sup> In the US, respondents provided their birth year and age was calculated manually (see replication code).

economic insecurity. The complete details of these measures, including question wording, can be found in the supplementary material.

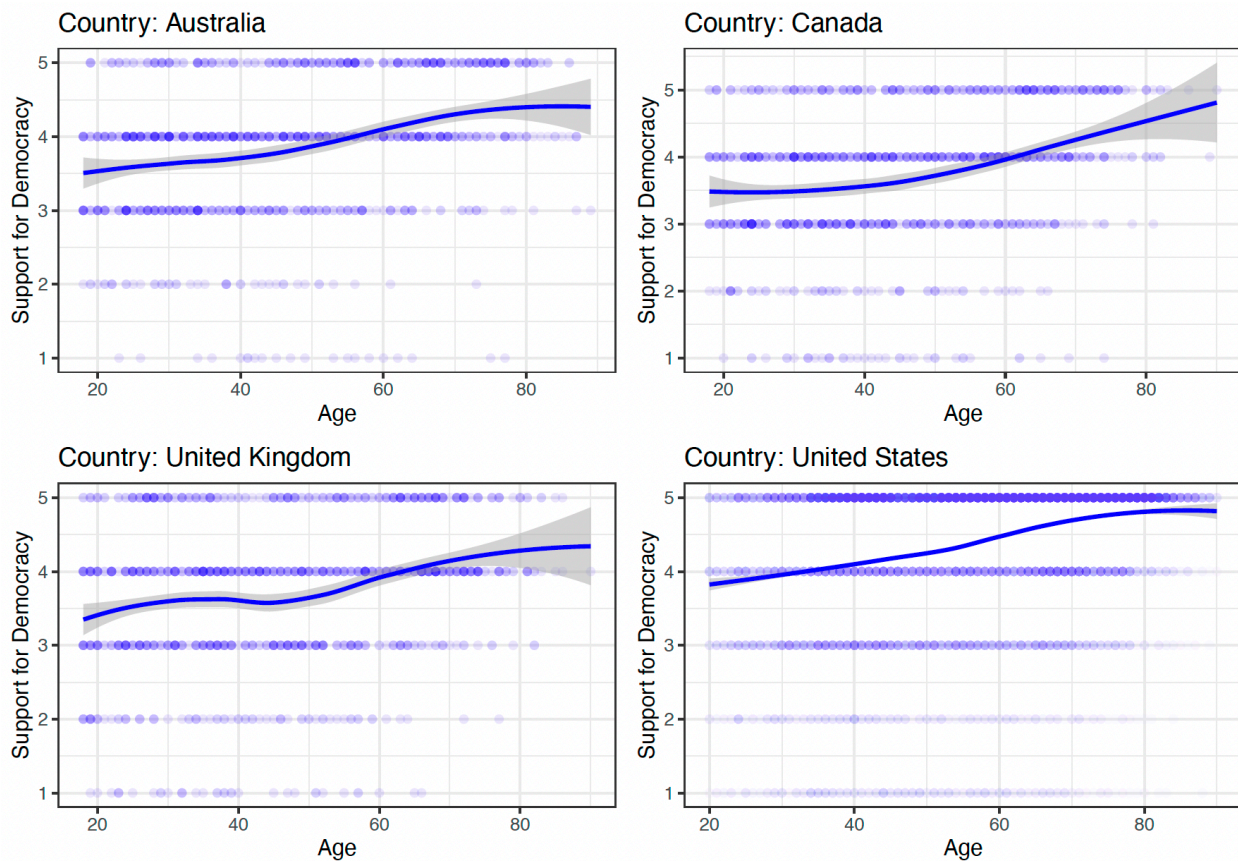
## Results

I begin by plotting a local regression curve for the outcome of democracy support across respondents' age. As we can see in **Error! Reference source not found.**, support for democracy as a regime type is lowest among younger respondents and highest among the oldest. This visual inspection of the association between the two variables provides initial confirmation of the hypothesis and demonstrates that the relation is approximately linear, with some larger standard errors towards the tail end of the distributions due to a lower number of respondents aged 80 and older. These country-level plots demonstrate that there is no significant heterogeneity in the relationship between the four country samples, implying similar trends in age-based differences in democratic support.

As a formal evaluation of the first hypothesis, I compute country-level multivariate linear regression models with various relevant control variables (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). As we can see, the association between support for democracy and a respondents' age is strong and statistically significant across all countries. In Australia, a one-unit increase in age is associated with 0.016-point increase in support for democracy. This implies that an 80-year-old respondent is, on average, 18 percentage points more supportive of democracy than a 20-year-old respondent (an absolute increase of 0.9 units on the democratic support scale). The coefficient for age is slightly larger in Canada and slightly smaller in the United Kingdom, indicating overall consistency in the association between age and support for democracy in these three countries. In the United States, a one-unit increase in age is associated with a 0.035-point increase in support for democracy. On the unique 10-point scale used for US respondents, this implies that an 80-year-

old respondent is, on average, 21 percentage points more supportive of democracy than a 20-year-old respondent (an absolute increase of 2.1 units on the scale). The results across the four countries are therefore highly consistent in terms of significance and magnitude.

**Figure 3.** Support for democracy as a function of age in four consolidated democracies



*Note:* Local regression (loess) curve with standard error shaded and individual observations plotted. Full model estimates presented in the supplementary material.

In terms of the control variables, two stand out from the rest. Most theoretically relevant, the models demonstrate a strong statistically significant association between individuals' self-reported economic insecurity and the outcome of support for democracy. To be more precise, these results indicate that individuals who are more economically insecure have, on average, much lower support for democracy than their opposites. This substantiates theoretical arguments regarding

democratic support, more specifically how attitudes towards the economy shape individuals' support for democracy as a regime type (see, for instance, Adserà et al., 2023; Bordeleau, 2025; Neundorf et al., 2024). In the United States, it particularly noteworthy that partisanship is strongly associated with support for democracy, with independents and Republicans being significantly less committed to democracy than Democrats. This is unsurprising considering the plethora of research on partisanship, polarization, and support for democracy in the United States (Graham & Svobik, 2020).

Overall, the results of these models provide robust evidence that even when controlling for a range of demographic and political factors, age remains strongly related to lower support for democracy. These results confirm the first hypothesis presented in this research, according to which younger respondents exhibit lower support for democracy than those from older cohorts.

**Table 11.** OLS regression models for democratic support

	Australia	Canada	United Kingdom	United States
(Intercept)	2.716*** (0.163)	2.979*** (0.194)	3.192*** (0.181)	3.536*** (0.046)
Age	0.016*** (0.001)	0.018*** (0.002)	0.014*** (0.002)	0.015*** (0.000)
Gender (Female)	-0.113* (0.053)	-0.106 (0.060)	-0.156* (0.061)	-0.035* (0.016)
Education	0.143*** (0.034)	0.038 (0.041)	0.092* (0.038)	0.148*** (0.007)
Economic Insecurity	-0.122** (0.040)	-0.191*** (0.046)	-0.155*** (0.045)	-0.055*** (0.006)
Political Ideology	-0.014 (0.012)	-0.025* (0.012)	0.002 (0.013)	
Partisanship (Democrat)				-0.153*** (0.009)
<i>N</i>	1,001	1,000	1,022	12,988
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.078	0.107	0.215	0.162
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> Adj.	0.077	0.106	0.213	0.161
Log. Likelihood	-4,146.05	-4,086.99	-3,890.37	-16619.02
RMSE	0.95	0.93	0.88	0.87

*Note:* Outcome variable is a support for democracy scale from 1 to 5 (low to high) in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom; and from 1 to 10 (low to high) in the United States. The reference category or base levels for the variables are as follows: for gender is female; for political ideology is left; for crime perception is low; for economic insecurity is secure; and for partisanship is democrat. Crime perceptions and representation were not measured in the US. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## **Test 2: Support for undemocratic practices**

Having found support for the first hypothesis, we now turn to the second test, which focuses on individual tolerance (and support) for undemocratic practices. To recall, I hypothesized that individuals from younger age groups will be more supportive of undemocratic practices than those from older cohorts. This second study relies only on the original survey data collected in Australia, Canada, and United Kingdom ( $N = 3,033$ ).

### **Measures**

For this second study, I divide respondents into the following three age groups: 18 to 39 (which includes Generation Z and the younger portion of Millennials); 40 to 59 (which includes the remaining portion of Millennials and Generation X); and lastly those 60+ (which includes Baby Boomers and earlier generations). The decision to divide across cohorts rather than generations stems primarily from the fact that it is an established practice within existing research (see Stockemer & Sundstrom, 2022).<sup>14</sup> It is also relevant to include Generation Z and younger Millennials within the same group since both have had childhoods or early adulthoods (i.e., formative years) marked by the rise of the internet and social media.

To measure respondents' support and tolerance for undemocratic practices, I relied on a 12-item questionnaire. Each item represented a specific policy or behaviour which infringed one or many liberal democratic norms. The answers to these items were captured on five-point Likert

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<sup>14</sup> While it is also common to see researchers to set the youngest cohort as including those who are 18 to 35, I prefer the 18 to 39 operationalization since it is the least likely to produce overestimations (in other words, the 18 to 39 group produces more conservative and robust estimates than a more restricted 18 to 34 group).

scales ranging from *strongly disagree* (1), *somewhat disagree* (2), *neither agree nor disagree* (3), *somewhat agree* (4), and *strongly agree* (5). The list of items was developed through a selection and adaptation of various different undemocratic measures used in existing research (including Braley et al., 2023; Druckman, 2023; Graham & Svulik, 2020; Pasek et al., 2022). The aim is to encapsulate actions that affect distinct components of democracy or constitute violations of different democratic norms. When required, the term *prime minister* is used to designate the head of government since the data was collected in constitutional monarchies with prime ministers as heads of governments. The final list of twelve items is presented in Table 4.3.

**Table 12.** Items capturing support for undemocratic practices or democratic norm violations

<b>Undemocratic practice or democratic norm violated</b>	<b>Survey item</b>
Irreversibility of elections	I think it is necessary sometimes to reverse the results of elections that the wrong candidate seems to have won.
Political violence	I support the use of force to prevent policies I disagree with from being enacted.
Voter fraud / Free and fair elections	It is sometimes necessary to forge ballots to ensure the correct political candidate wins.
Freedom of expression	Some political candidates should be banned from social media.
Freedom of assembly	I would support legislation that limits the ability of some politicians to hold political rallies.
Rule of law	The government should be able to bend the law to solve pressing issues.
Voter suppression / Right to vote	I think it is necessary to pass laws that make it harder for some people to vote.
Political accountability	Politicians who have a majority of support should be protected from criminal prosecution.
Judicial independence	A prime minister should not be bound by court decisions they believe are politicized.
Right to run for office	Some people should be banned from running for public office regardless of how popular they are.
Media independence / control	Some media organizations should be forced to close down because of their bias and insincerity.
Freedom of speech / assembly	The government should have the power to ban organizations that promote subversive values.

## Results

The second hypothesis asserts that individuals from younger age groups will be more supportive

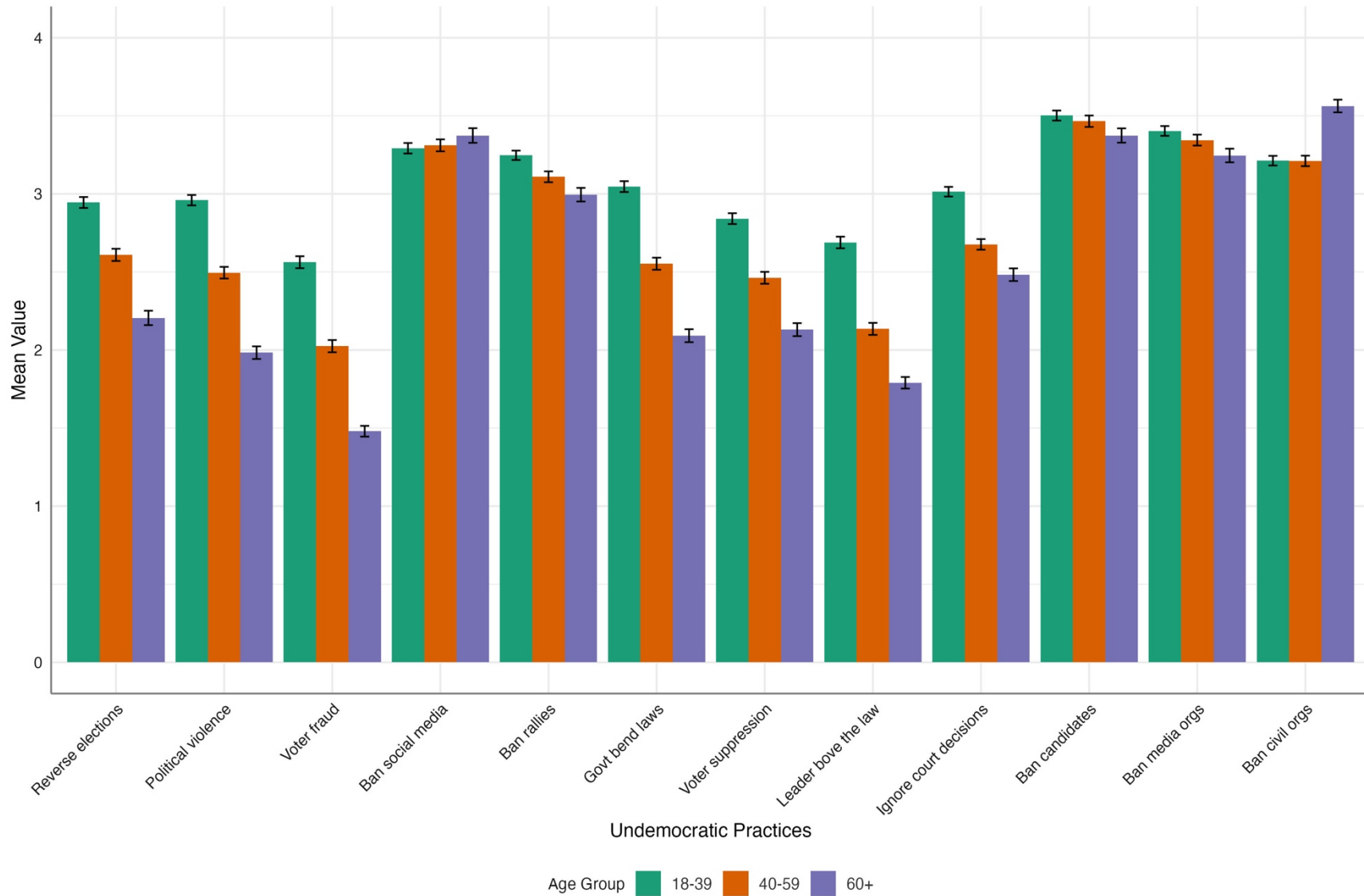
of undemocratic practices than those from older cohorts. Looking at the average support for twelve distinct undemocratic policies or infringements to democratic norms across age groups, we find that younger citizens are substantively more likely to support illiberal and undemocratic policies in comparison to older citizens (see Figure 4). Across the twelve measured variables, the mean score of the youngest age group (18 to 39) is highest in ten instances, leaving only two undemocratic policies for which older age groups are more supportive.

Among the undemocratic practices and democratic norm infringements that younger respondents support more than their older counterparts, we find the reversal of election results, the use of force to achieve one's political goals, committing voter fraud, allowing the government to bend the law for the sake of efficiency, limiting the pool of eligible voters (voter suppression), accepting that the head of government is above the law and cannot be prosecuted, as well as allowing the government to ignore court decisions as it sees fit. The oldest age group (60+) has an average level of support higher than younger age groups for only two undemocratic practices: banning civil organizations that promote subversive values and banning certain candidates from social media. These two outliers are not surprising considering that older individuals are less favorably disposed to social media (Hutto et al., 2015; Xie et al., 2012) and are generally more inclined to social dominance and opposing subversive values (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

To statistically estimate differences in tolerance for undemocratic practices between age groups, I compute multivariate OLS regression models for each of the twelve undemocratic variables. As we can see from Table 13, the results of these models mostly support the hypothesis according to which younger cohorts are more undemocratic than older cohorts. Substantively, the difference between the youngest cohort and the two older cohorts is statistically significant for seven of the items (goes up to eight when comparing the youngest and oldest cohort only). These

results are inclusive of several control variables, including gender, education, political ideology, economic condition, crime perceptions, representation perceptions, and country fixed effects.

**Figure 4.** Average support for various undemocratic practices and anti-democratic norms by age cohort



*Note.* Bar graph of mean values on the undemocratic scales with standard errors. Respondents had to indicate the extent they agreed with each statement on a scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The full statements are listed in the methodology section (see Table 2).

**Table 13.** OLS regression models for various undemocratic practices and anti-democratic norms

	Reverse elections	Political violence	Voter fraud	Ban social media	Ban Rallies	Govt can bend laws	Suppress voters	Leader is above law	Ignore courts	Ban candidates	Ban media	Ban civil orgs
(Intercept)	2.025*** (0.134)	1.937*** (0.125)	1.303*** (0.128)	2.868*** (0.134)	2.442*** (0.121)	1.986*** (0.128)	1.718*** (0.127)	1.375*** (0.125)	2.062*** (0.116)	3.338*** (0.129)	2.896*** (0.124)	2.360*** (0.116)
40–59	-0.304*** (0.052)	-0.435*** (0.049)	-0.458*** (0.050)	0.035 (0.052)	-0.092+ (0.047)	-0.418*** (0.050)	-0.330*** (0.050)	-0.464*** (0.049)	-0.279*** (0.045)	-0.029 (0.050)	-0.030 (0.048)	0.084+ (0.045)
60+	-0.686*** (0.058)	-0.920*** (0.054)	-0.990*** (0.056)	0.121* (0.058)	-0.180*** (0.052)	-0.872*** (0.056)	-0.645*** (0.055)	-0.826*** (0.054)	-0.467*** (0.050)	-0.088 (0.056)	-0.104+ (0.054)	0.416*** (0.050)
Gender	0.150** (0.046)	0.058 (0.042)	0.025 (0.044)	0.127** (0.046)	0.161*** (0.041)	0.144*** (0.044)	0.032 (0.043)	-0.009 (0.043)	0.132*** (0.040)	0.139** (0.044)	0.068 (0.042)	-0.026 (0.039)
Education	-0.048 (0.030)	-0.047+ (0.028)	-0.022 (0.029)	-0.069* (0.030)	-0.004 (0.027)	-0.024 (0.029)	-0.020 (0.029)	-0.046 (0.028)	-0.088*** (0.026)	-0.018 (0.029)	0.034 (0.028)	0.041 (0.026)
Ideology	0.072*** (0.010)	0.068*** (0.009)	0.059*** (0.010)	0.014 (0.010)	0.041*** (0.009)	0.048*** (0.010)	0.088*** (0.010)	0.083*** (0.009)	0.056*** (0.009)	-0.007 (0.010)	0.037*** (0.009)	0.031*** (0.009)
Crime	0.106*** (0.018)	0.124*** (0.016)	0.134*** (0.017)	0.095*** (0.018)	0.076*** (0.016)	0.070*** (0.017)	0.130*** (0.017)	0.094*** (0.017)	0.095*** (0.015)	0.075*** (0.017)	0.072*** (0.016)	0.052*** (0.015)
Economy	-0.007 (0.035)	0.022 (0.033)	-0.016 (0.034)	-0.008 (0.035)	0.023 (0.032)	-0.022 (0.034)	-0.023 (0.033)	-0.026 (0.033)	0.004 (0.031)	-0.018 (0.034)	-0.015 (0.033)	-0.049 (0.030)
Represented	0.037*** (0.009)	0.051*** (0.008)	0.104*** (0.009)	0.027** (0.009)	0.050*** (0.008)	0.100*** (0.009)	0.052*** (0.009)	0.126*** (0.008)	0.085*** (0.008)	0.005 (0.009)	0.013 (0.008)	0.095*** (0.008)
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>N</i>	3,023	3,023	3,023	3,023	3,023	3,023	3,023	3,023	3,023	3,023	3,023	3,023
R <sup>2</sup>	0.097	0.155	0.193	0.021	0.045	0.155	0.124	0.199	0.111	0.013	0.021	0.091
R <sup>2</sup> Adj.	0.094	0.152	0.191	0.017	0.041	0.153	0.121	0.196	0.108	0.010	0.018	0.088
Log. Lik.	-4889.683	-4665.823	-4750.410	-4879.528	-4569.730	-4752.830	-4728.120	-4679.764	-4453.587	-4774.185	-4652.897	-4441.205
RMSE	1.22	1.13	1.16	1.22	1.10	1.17	1.16	1.14	1.06	1.17	1.13	1.05

*Note:* Outcome variable is a support for undemocratic practices index from 1 to 5 (low to high). The reference category for age cohort is 18–39; for gender is female; for political ideology is left; for crime perception is low; and for economic insecurity is secure. +  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

### **Test 3: Conjoint experiment on democracy**

The previous two tests examine age-based differences in support for democracy and undemocratic practices using observational data. While these data are helpful to paint a picture of the associations between our variables of interest, they do not allow us the ability to make causal conclusions. To complement these analyses, I propose a third and final test which leverages an experimental design embedded in the original survey study.

#### **Experimental design**

To causally estimate individual differences in preferences for democracy between age groups, I conducted a paired-profile conjoint experiment across the same three contemporary democracies used in the previous study: Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. This conjoint experiment exposed respondents to three pairs of hypothetical societies and tasks them with deciding which they would prefer to live in as well as rating each individual society (3 x 2 design). The profiles randomly varied along seven attributes: elections, free speech, media freedom, checks on the executive, political accountability, economic performance, and crime rate. In this context, a conjoint experiment allows me to simultaneously assess the relative importance of the included components. Such an experimental design is particularly well-suited for this study because it mimics real-world decision-making processes and provides a nuanced understanding of respondents' preferences for democratic institutions and norms.

The primary objective of this experiment is to evaluate how each attribute impacts the likelihood of a profile being preferred, both individually and in interaction with other factors. The complete dimensions and levels of the conjoint experiment are presented in Table 6. These levels were designed to capture five distinct democratic institutions/norms.

**Table 14.** Dimensions and levels of conjoint experiment

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Levels (R = Reference level)</b>
Economy	3. People generally live comfortably on their income and can afford most things they need. 4. Many people struggle to live on their income and must make decisions about what they can afford. (R)
Crime	3. Crime rates in the country are low and stable. 4. The country struggles with high crime rates. (R)
Elections	3. Citizens elect their leaders in free and fair elections. 4. Citizens go to the polls, but elections are neither free nor fair. (R)
Media	1. Media organizations are free and not influenced by the government. 2. The government controls media organizations and influence their content. (R)
Accountability	3. Political leaders who have a majority of support are protected from criminal prosecution. 4. Political leaders who have a majority of support are not protected from criminal investigations and prosecution. (R)
Free Speech	3. People can criticize the government in public without getting prosecuted by authorities. 4. People could get prosecuted by authorities when criticizing the government in public. (R)
Checks & Balances	3. The prime minister must answer to the Parliament and courts. 4. The prime minister can rule without constraints from Parliament and courts. (R)

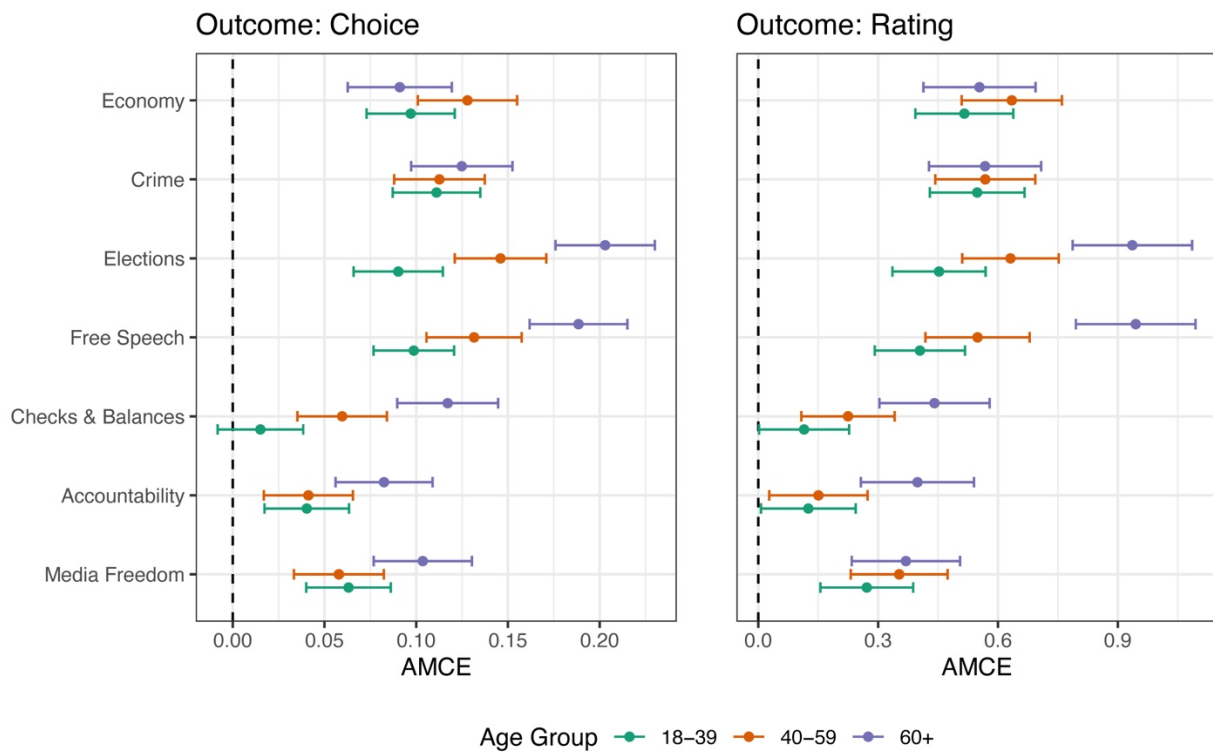
## Results

To provide a more robust causal estimation of the differences in support for democracy and undemocratic alternatives across age groups, I rely on the results of a conjoint experiment. To recall, this experiment tasked respondents with choosing between two hypothetical country profiles that randomly varied on seven key dimensions: electoral integrity, voting rights, constraints on the executive, political accountability, free speech, economic performance, and crime rates.

I begin by assessing respondents' relative preference for different levels of each attribute across cohorts by computing subgroup Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs), which capture the average impact of each individual factor when all other factors are held constant at their means (repeated for each subgroup, i.e., cohort). More precisely, I employ simple linear regression with respondent-clustered standard errors (Hainmueller et al., 2014). The AMCEs with respondent-clustered standard errors were computed using the *estimatr* package (Blair et al., 2024).

All analyses were made in R version 4.4.1 (2024-06-14). I provide the results for two complementary models: the binary “choice” outcome (whether a profile was selected over the paired alternative) and the individual ratings for each conjoint card. By analyzing both choice outcomes and card ratings, I can capture not only the attributes that drive selection between profiles but also the specific appeal or aversion to each attribute in isolation (Elrod et al., 1992).

**Figure 5.** AMCEs for choice and rating outcome



*Note:* Subgroup AMCEs computed from OLS regressions with respondent-clustered standard errors ( $N = 18,186$ ). Full estimates are presented in the supplementary material. For the choice outcome, estimates represent the change in the probability of selecting a card with the specific level of each attribute. For the rating outcome, estimates represent the shift in the mean value of the rating scale for a card with the specific level of each attribute.

Figure 5 presents the subgroup AMCEs using the pooled sample for both the choice outcome (whether a card was selected) and rating outcome (the individual rating of each card). As we can see, there is substantial heterogeneity in the preferences of respondents based on their cohort. In terms of the economy and crime rates, cohort-level differences are negligible. However, when we

look at the various democracy attributes, a clear pattern emerges: younger cohorts prefer democracy significantly less than older cohorts.

Consistent with existing research, we find that elections and free speech are the most valued dimensions of democracy for all groups (Bordeleau, 2025; Neundorf et al., 2024). With that said, the youngest age group provides, on average, a rating that is 0.42 points lower than the oldest age group for a card in which elections are free and fair (ratings measured on 10-point scale). The difference in rating is 0.50 for free speech, 0.32 for checks and balances, and 0.28 for accountability. Perhaps most worrying is the AMCE for checks and balances among the youngest age group: it is not statistically distinguishable from zero, indicating that the presence or absence of check and balances has little to no influence on younger citizens' preferences for a society. Citizens from the youngest age group are therefore equally likely to tolerate living in a society that has no checks on executive power compared to a democratic society with clear executive checks and balances.

Interestingly, age differences are only prevalent for the democracy attributes. The preferences of respondents for strong economic performance and lower crime rates are equivalent between the three age groups. This means that everyone, regardless of their age, prefer living in societies with strong economies and lower crime rates (to the same extent). This is in stark contrast to the age differences identifies for democracy attributes, confirming that there is a clear disconnect in the preferences different age groups have towards democracy.

Substantively, and complementing the cross-sectional analyses, these findings confirm my hypotheses. Indeed, I find strong and robust evidence of lower preference for democracy and greater tolerance for undemocratic practices among the youngest age group. The differences are gradual across age groups, with the oldest group being least tolerant of undemocratic practices and

the youngest group being the most tolerant. These results are consistent between the rating and choice outcomes, indicating uniformity among respondents' card selections and their rating for each card.

## **General Discussion**

Theoretically, this research aligns with the concerns articulated by Foa and Mounk (2019), who warned of democratic grievances and cynicism leading younger citizens towards democratic antipathy. They suggest that initial cynicism or apathy can escalate into open challenges against liberal democratic norms, such as freedom of speech, press independence, and the rule of law. The cross-sectional and experimental evidence in this study reaffirms this pessimistic interpretation, suggesting a deeper, more systemic shift away from democratic values among younger age groups. This shift challenges alternative narratives, such as those by Norris (1999, 2011) and Claassen and Magalhães (2023), which portray younger individuals as critical yet fundamentally supportive of democratic frameworks. The empirical evidence suggests a trend of growing support for undemocratic practices and anti-democratic norms, something which goes beyond the scope of a critical yet democracy-aspiring citizen.

Empirically, the results of this research have significant repercussions. The attitudes of young people toward democracy are particularly consequential for the future stability of liberal democracies. As democracy fundamentally relies on active and engaged citizens to counterbalance would-be autocrats, a shift in youth allegiance towards illiberal and anti-democratic norms could accelerate democratic erosion by enabling authoritarianism. Scholars such as Foa and Mounk (2016) have highlighted that democratic consolidation is not a static achievement but requires ongoing support from the populace, particularly younger generations. When youth disengage from

democratic norms or actively support anti-democratic parties, they weaken the societal bulwarks that prevent authoritarian encroachments. This trend, if left unchecked, could undermine the mechanisms that safeguard democratic institutions, leading to potential democratic backsliding and autocratization.

This research also sheds light on the underlying causal mechanisms driving shifts in democratic norms and values between age groups. The gradual, intergenerational decline in democratic commitment suggests that each successive age group is less attached to democratic ideals than the one before. This trend underscores the role of democratic grievances in catalyzing disenchantment. Issues like youth underrepresentation (Stockemer & Sundstrom, 2022), economic inequality, and persistent socioeconomic hardships (Zagórski et al., 2021) have eroded trust in democratic institutions and processes, particularly among younger citizens. The interplay between these grievances and the modern information environment has further exacerbated this shift. The rise of social media has created echo chambers and facilitated the spread of anti-democratic rhetoric, making it easier for illiberal politicians to mobilize disenchanted youth (Persily & Tucker, 2020). This growing ecosystem not only amplifies dissatisfaction, but also normalizes undemocratic alternatives, weakening the perceived legitimacy of democratic governance.

On the policy side, the findings from this research also highlight an urgent need for intervention from policymakers, educators, and civil society organizations. The extent of the shift towards undemocratic norms among young people suggests that traditional methods of engagement and education may no longer suffice. A multi-faceted approach is necessary to address this crisis of democratic commitment and undemocratic normalization. Strengthening civic education should be a priority, with curriculum that not only inform about democratic processes but also actively engage students in democratic participation. Interactive and experiential learning

opportunities, such as mock elections, debates, and community projects, could cultivate a more profound appreciation for democratic values (for a review, see Aura et al., 2022). Beyond these civic education efforts, there is a clear need for the development of youth-specific interventions to tackle anti-democratic attitudes and support for undemocratic practices. Research on such interventions, including recent works by Voelkel et al. (2022), is crucial to stop and revert the undemocratic shift identified among younger citizens. Considering the findings of this research, these works should begin adapting their frameworks to youth-centric approaches.

Lastly, addressing the structural issues and grievances fueling disenchantment—such as youth underrepresentation in political institutions and economic disparities—is essential. Policymakers must prioritize inclusive policies that give younger generations a tangible stake in democratic systems. This could include lowering barriers to political participation, reforming electoral systems to better represent young voices, and creating economic opportunities that address youth unemployment and underemployment (Juelich & Coll, 2021). Representative democratic institutions must also strive to be more representative of younger voices, whether through lowering the voting age, lowering the age of eligibility for elected offices, or installing youth quotas for representative bodies (Belschner & Garcia de Paredes, 2021; Sundström & Stockemer, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

Using observational and experimental data, I find clear evidence that younger citizens are less supportive of democracy and more tolerant of a wide range of undemocratic practices. Substantively, this research contributes to the growing literature on generational differences in democratic support and responds to ongoing debates about the vulnerability of liberal democracies to shifting democratic norms among younger generations. The evidence presented highlights a

disturbing trend: young people are not only “checking out” of democracy, but they are also checking-in to undemocratic alternatives (Berthin, 2023).

In conclusion, the age-related differences in democratic support observed in this study indicate a pressing challenge for the sustainability of democratic governance. Reversing the trend of democratic antipathy among younger citizens requires comprehensive strategies that address both the symptoms and root causes of democratic grievances and disenchantment. Such approaches will need to target the self-fulfilling prophecy whereby youth are disengaged, the system doesn't work for them, they become less supportive of democracy, and then they turn to undemocratic practices. By targeting anti-democratic attitudes and fostering a renewed commitment to democratic principles, there is potential to rejuvenate democratic engagement and ensure the resilience of democratic institutions in the face of generational change.

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## Supplementary Material

### Research Ethics

This research was approved by the University of Ottawa's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board (Project # S-09-24-10057) and complies with both the *Tri-Council Policy Statement 2* (TCPS-2) as well as APSA's *Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research*. The survey and data collection procedure for the ELTS was approved by the Princeton University Institutional Review Board. The experiment was made possible through funding by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Canada and the author received additional research funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. There are no known conflicts of interests to disclose. The study did not include any form of deception: participants were fully aware they were taking part in a scientific study and provided their informed consent.

(0) Participants were recruited through the market research platform Qualtrics between 28 November 2024 and 5 December 2024. To be eligible, respondents had to be citizens of Australia, Canada or the United Kingdom. All participants were fairly compensated at Qualtrics' pre-established rate of \$2.10 (based on hourly rate of \$15.75 for an average survey completion time of 8 minutes). Once a person had received and accepted an invitation to participate, they were routed to a survey mounted on the Qualtrics platform. This survey included three sections: a sociodemographic questionnaire, a political attitudes survey, and the conjoint experiment. The data and replication code are also available online on the OSF project page (<https://osf.io/95pz2/>).

### Sample composition and balance tests

Country-level representative samples were ensured using recruitment quotas based on the latest available census data. Table 4.2 presents the sociodemographic composition of the sample at the

country-level and pooled. As we can see, the sample is well balanced both within and between countries. More details on the sample composition, including the survey quotas and balance tests, are available in the supplementary material.

**Table S15.** Sample composition (pooled and by country)

	<b>United States</b> ( <i>N</i> = 17,707)	<b>Australia</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,005)	<b>Canada</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,002)	<b>United Kingdom</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,026)
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	48.69	46.11	43.84	47.95
Female	51.31	53.89	56.16	52.05
<b>Age</b>				
18-39	17.62	40.01	39.22	41.13
40-59	30.25	33.33	37.52	32.26
60+	52.13	26.57	23.25	26.61
<b>Education</b>				
Secondary or less	32.14	31.37	25.27	28.46
University degree	47.88	40.44	44.66	37.23
Higher education	19.98	28.19	30.07	34.31
<b>Partisanship</b>				
Democrat	36.80	—	—	—
Republican	38.19	—	—	—
Independent	25.01	—	—	—
<b>Ideology</b>				
Left	—	16.17	16.08	17.25
Centre	—	60.98	56.94	56.24
Right	—	22.85	26.97	26.54

*Note:* Entries are percentages. Categories do not necessarily add up to 100% due to missing responses.

To ensure the three country samples for the original survey data are well balanced, I compute the standardized mean difference. The standardized mean difference (SMD) is a measure used to assess the balance of a variable between two or more groups, in this case the different country samples. This test is only computed for the three countries for which experimental data was collected. The test standardizes the difference in means to account for variability, making it easier to compare balance across variables measured on different scales. The results of SMD are presented in the Table S1 below. Note that SMD values below 0.1 typically indicate good balance

between groups. Based on this cutoff, the balance tests reveal no imbalance between the samples collected in the three countries.

**Table S16.** Standardized mean difference (SMD) test

	<b>Australia</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,005)	<b>Canada</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,002)	<b>United Kingdom</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,026)	<b>SMD</b>
<b>Age</b>	46.87 (17.85)	46.15 (16.53)	46.41 (17.57)	0.027
<b>Gender</b>	462 (46.1)	439 (43.9)	490 (47.9)	0.054
<b>Education</b>	1.97 (0.77)	2.05 (0.74)	2.06 (0.79)	0.078

*Note:* For age, entries are the mean with standard deviation in parentheses. For gender, entries are the number of male respondents with the percentage of male respondents in parentheses. For education, entries are the mean with standard deviation in parentheses.

### Survey questions

Prior to completing the conjoint tasks, respondents answered an informed consent form and a sociodemographic questionnaire. This included providing their age, gender, province/region of residence, education level, and household income. In addition to this questionnaire, participants completed several political attitudes measures, including left-right political orientation, perception of economic condition, and perception of physical security. Table S3 presents the list of questions in the survey questionnaire. Respondents answered this questionnaire prior to completing the conjoint task.

**Table S17.** Survey questions

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Coding</b>
Age	How old are you?	Continuous variable [18 to 99]
Gender	How do you describe yourself?	0 – Female 1 – Male 99 – Other
Education	What is the highest level of education you have completed? If still a student, please mark the current level of education.	1 – Secondary school or lower

		<p>2 – Further education (academic or vocational, including undergraduate studies)</p> <p>3 – Higher education (professional degree, master's or doctorate)</p>
Ideology	In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?	<p>0 – Left</p> <p>1</p> <p>2</p> <p>3</p> <p>4</p> <p>5</p> <p>6</p> <p>7</p> <p>8</p> <p>9</p> <p>10 – Right</p>
Partisanship	Do you currently identify with a political party? If yes, which one?	<p>1 – Democrat</p> <p>2 – Independent</p> <p>3 – Republican</p>
Perception of personal economic condition (economic insecurity)	Which of the following comes closest to how you feel about your household's income nowadays?	<p>1 – Living comfortably on present income</p> <p>2 – Challenging to live on present income</p> <p>3 – Very difficult to live on present income</p>
Support for democracy (original survey)	Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: <i>Democracy may have its problems, but it is still the best form of government.</i>	<p>1 – Strongly disagree</p> <p>2 – Disagree</p> <p>3 – Neutral</p> <p>4 – Agree</p> <p>5 – Strongly agree</p>
Support for democracy (ELTS 2024)	How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?	<p>1 – Not at all important</p> <p>2 –</p> <p>3 –</p> <p>4 –</p> <p>5 – Absolutely important</p>

## Full estimates for graphs and figures

The manuscript includes figures and plots that do not provide the specific value of the estimates computed. To remedy this situation, I provide in this section various tables with all of the computed estimates that are graphically represented in the main text. I begin with Table S4, which presents the estimates for Figure 2 of the main text.

**Table S18.** Mean support for undemocratic practices by age group

	Mean Score (SE)		
	18 to 39	40 to 59	60+
I think it is necessary sometimes to reverse the results of elections that the wrong candidate seems to have won.	2.94 (0.03)	2.61 (0.03)	2.21 (0.05)
I support the use of force to prevent policies I disagree with from being enacted.	2.96 (0.03)	2.50 (0.04)	1.98 (0.04)
It is sometimes necessary to forge ballots to ensure the correct political candidate wins.	2.56 (0.04)	2.02 (0.04)	1.48 (0.03)
Some political candidates should be banned from social media.	3.29 (0.03)	3.31 (0.04)	3.37 (0.05)
I would support legislation that limits the ability of some politicians to hold political rallies.	3.25 (0.03)	3.11 (0.03)	2.99 (0.04)
The government should be able to bend the law to solve pressing issues.	3.05 (0.03)	2.55 (0.04)	2.09 (0.04)
I think it is necessary to pass laws that make it harder for some people to vote.	2.84 (0.03)	2.46 (0.04)	2.13 (0.04)
Politicians who have a majority of support should be protected from criminal prosecution.	2.69 (0.04)	2.14 (0.04)	1.79 (0.04)
A prime minister should not be bound by court decisions they believe are politicized.	3.01 (0.03)	2.68 (0.03)	2.48 (0.04)
Some people should be banned from running for public office regardless of how popular they are.	3.50 (0.03)	3.47 (0.04)	3.37 (0.05)
Some media organizations should be forced to close down because of their bias and insincerity.	3.40 (0.03)	3.34 (0.04)	3.25 (0.04)
The government should have the power to ban organizations that promote subversive values.	3.21 (0.03)	3.21 (0.03)	3.56 (0.04)

*Note.* Mean score with standard error in parentheses.

Next, I present the full estimates from the conjoint experiment. Table S5 present the AMCEs for the choice and rating outcomes by age group. These estimates are illustrated in Figure 3 of the manuscript.

**Table S19.** AMCEs for choice and rating outcomes by age group

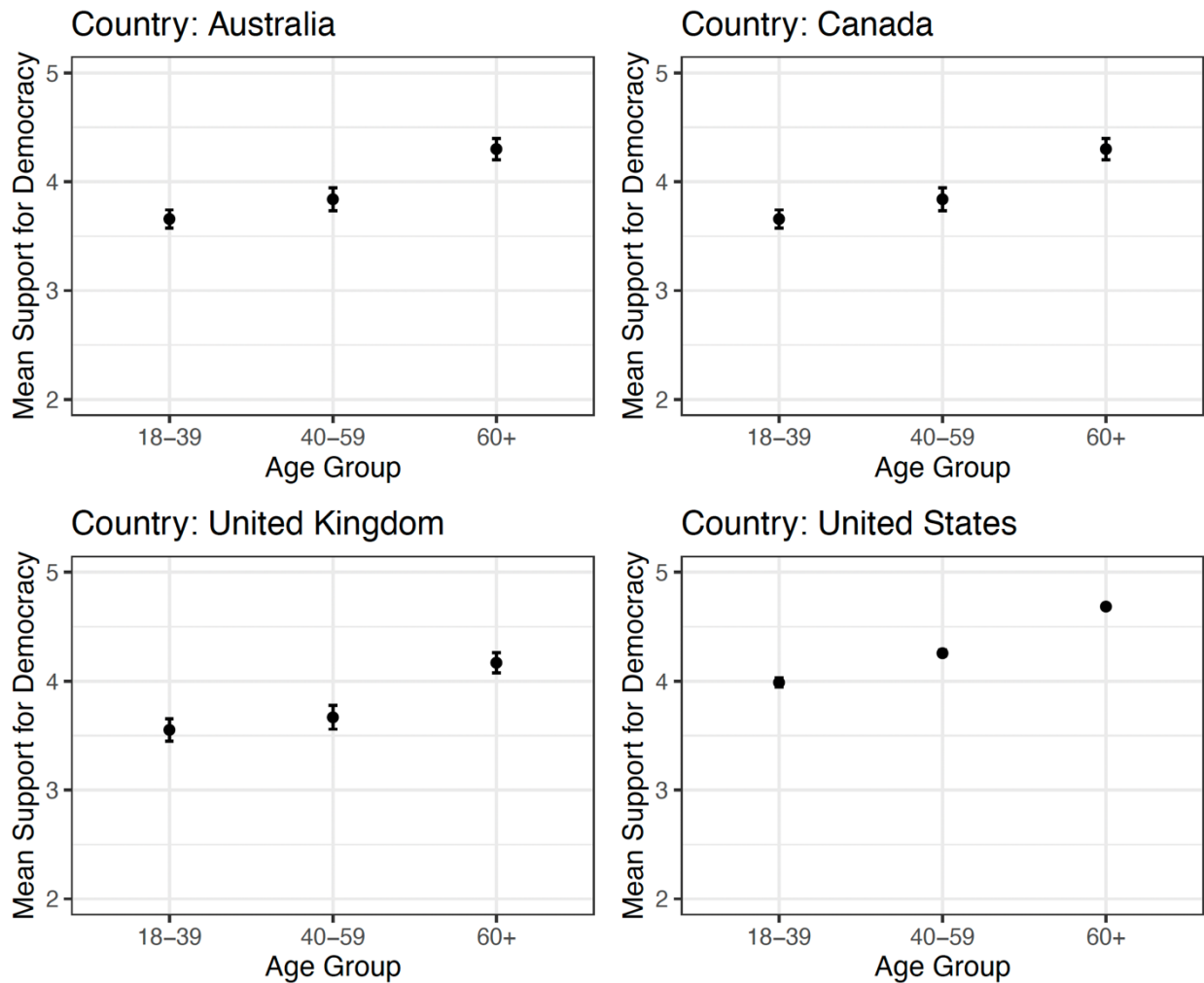
	Choice Outcome			Rating Outcome		
	18 to 39	40 to 59	60+	18 to 39	40 to 59	60+
Economy	0.097 (0.012)	0.127 (0.014)	0.091 (0.014)	0.516 (0.063)	0.635 (0.064)	0.554 (0.072)
Crime	0.111 (0.012)	0.112 (0.013)	0.125 (0.014)	0.548 (0.060)	0.568 (0.064)	0.568 (0.072)
Elections	0.090 (0.012)	0.146 (0.013)	0.203 (0.014)	0.452 (0.060)	0.631 (0.062)	0.936 (0.076)
Executive	0.015 (0.012)	0.059 (0.012)	0.117 (0.014)	0.115 (0.057)	0.225 (0.060)	0.441 (0.070)
Law	0.040 (0.012)	0.041 (0.012)	0.082 (0.014)	0.125 (0.060)	0.151 (0.063)	0.398 (0.072)
Media Freedom	0.063 (0.012)	0.058 (0.013)	0.104 (0.014)	0.272 (0.059)	0.353 (0.062)	0.370 (0.069)
Free Speech	0.098 (0.011)	0.132 (0.013)	0.188 (0.014)	0.405 (0.058)	0.549 (0.067)	0.945 (0.076)

*Note:* The reference category for each attribute is the democratic backsliding level. AMCE estimates with respondent-clustered robust standard errors in parentheses.

### Categorical model for democratic support

In the manuscript, the initial investigation of the relationship between a respondent’s age and their support for democracy is modelled linearly. This was done to facilitate the interpretation of the results and identify the linearity of the relationship. However, since the study is interested in differences in support for democracy across age *groups*, I present here the results of the same analyses with the categorical coding of the age variable (see Figure S1). Please note that the y-axis is truncated to facilitate the displaying of the point estimates and 95% confidence intervals (scale from 2 to 5 instead of the measured scale of 1 to 5).

**Figure S6.** Mean support for democracy by country across age groups



*Note:* Point estimates are mean support for democracy scores with 95% confidence intervals plotted.

### **Power analysis for conjoint experiment**

With an effective sample size of 18,198 observations (3,033 respondents x 3x2 profiles) and an alpha-level of 0.05, I am able to capture an Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) of 0.07 with 99.90% power. At the country-level, I am able to capture an AMCE of 0.07 with 82.85% power. These power analyses were computed using the ‘cjpowR’ package in R (Schuessler & Freitag, 2020).

## **Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion**

This dissertation explored the complexities of citizen support for democracy and the conditions under which individuals are willing to tolerate undemocratic practices. Through three empirical studies, I have demonstrated how partisan misperceptions, democratic trade-offs, and age shape democratic (and undemocratic) attitudes in consolidated democracies. This chapter presents a general discussion of the key findings from the three articles, bringing them in conversation with one another, and highlighting the contributions of this research to the academic literature. I begin by outlining the general contributions of the thesis as a whole, especially with regards to the expanded conceptualization and comparative coverage relative to existing works. I then summarize and discuss the main findings from each article, discussing their individual theoretical and empirical contributions, before providing some concluding remarks about the state of the literature and directions for future research.

### **From Context to Concept: The Main Contributions of this Dissertation**

What this dissertation shows, first and foremost, is that the theoretical developments in the literature on public support for democratic erosion requires greater empirical and methodological reflections. As it stands, the literature has sought to create complex mechanisms to understand why people support undemocratic practices all the while ignoring crucial concerns in terms of how we measure this support and where we test such mechanisms (see, for example, Braley et al., 2023; Graham & Svobik, 2020). This is a consistent problem across the various theoretical and

disciplinary perspectives that have emerge in this nascent area of study. In the long term, such disregard for empirical reflections could lead to the creation of conceptualization-specific models that apply only when measuring support for undemocratic practices in a certain way. Alternatively, it may also create theoretical perspectives that only apply in unique contexts, such as the hyper-polarized bipartisan system of the United States, but fail to generalize beyond these confines.

### **Context-Dependent or Universal Mechanisms?**

The three articles provide evidence that some theoretical mechanisms are universal, while others are more context-specific. For instance, the partisan misperception framework explored in the first article demonstrates that even in three very similar countries, partisan dynamics shape support for various undemocratic practices differently. The country-level inconsistencies in the findings of the first article are a clear demonstration that attempts to understand support for undemocratic practices through partisan-based universal mechanisms are imprudent. Existing works which focus on unique cases may therefore be ungeneralizable beyond these very cases (particularly valid for the United States; see Pasek et al., 2022; Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Braley et al., 2023).

In general, this suggests that partisan identity is not a one-size-fits-all predictor of support for undemocratic practices; its effects may vary significantly depending on specific political, social, and historical contexts. For example, while partisan polarization may be a powerful driver of support for undemocratic practices in the United States (see Druckman, 2023; Braley et al., 2023), where political divisions are particularly pronounced, the same dynamics may not hold in countries with more moderate partisan landscapes. Such variations underscore the need for scholars to carefully consider the particularities of each political system when theorizing about democratic erosion. What holds true in one context may not necessarily apply to another, even among countries that appear similar on the surface, such as in terms of wealth, democratic history, or political

structure. Therefore, any attempt to build a universal model of support for undemocratic practices based solely on the psychological dynamics of partisanship risks overlooking critical contextual factors that may shape the outcomes in different settings (consider, for example, the nature of party systems themselves; see Frederiksen, 2024a).

In contrast, the second and third articles demonstrate the existence of universal mechanisms in explaining support for undemocratic practices. Indeed, the proposed theoretical perspectives were equally relevant in the three countries considered in this dissertation, as well as in the countries where these mechanisms were initially developed, such as the United States (Foa and Mounk, 2016; 2019; Adserà et al., 2023). This supports the idea that certain factors—such as political cynicism, distrust in democratic institutions, and perceptions of political efficacy—may consistently influence support for undemocratic practices across different consolidated democracies (Gidron et al., 2025). However, this does not imply that these mechanisms will apply universally across all political systems. Rather, the evidence suggests that these mechanisms are robust in contexts with similar levels of democratic consolidation and political stability, such as in consolidated democracies with strong institutional frameworks (including Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom). These mechanisms may operate differently, or not at all, in countries experiencing political instability, democratization, or autocratic rule (Orhan, 2022). This realization is crucial for advancing the literature, as it underscores the importance of delineating the conditions under which universal mechanisms apply and when they might fail to do so.

This dissertation contributes to the literature by demonstrating that while certain theoretical mechanisms can be generalized to similar consolidated democracies, others are highly context-dependent. This is a critical distinction in the study of democratic erosion because it highlights the need for more nuanced and contextually grounded theoretical work. Testing theoretical

mechanisms in multiple settings not only strengthens the external validity of the findings but also refines our understanding of the mechanisms themselves. By examining support for undemocratic practices in different national contexts, this dissertation shows how the same theoretical framework can reveal divergent patterns depending on political, social, and institutional variables unique to each context. This process ultimately advances our understanding of the complex dynamics between individual-level attitudes and institutional structures that shape public support for democratic backsliding (Gidron et al., 2025).

Furthermore, this dissertation contributes to a more sophisticated theoretical framework by underscoring the need for cross-contextual testing of mechanisms. Many existing studies rely heavily on case studies from a limited number of countries, often focusing on the U.S. or Western Europe (see Braley et al., 2023; Druckman, 2023; Pasek et al., 2022; Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Foa and Mounk, 2025). While these case studies provide valuable insights, they also risk producing conclusions that are overly specific or that fail to capture the diversity of experiences in other parts of the world. By expanding the empirical testing to multiple countries with varying political landscapes, this dissertation helps to bridge this gap, offering a more inclusive approach to understanding the dynamics of democratic erosion. This approach enhances the theoretical debate by providing a clearer picture of when and how particular mechanisms can be expected to shape public support for undemocratic practices, thus offering more grounded and robust theoretical models for future research.

In addition, the dissertation challenges the idea that any single theory can provide a comprehensive explanation of support for undemocratic practices in all settings (for further demonstration, see *Gidron et al., 2025*). This contribution is crucial because it encourages a more flexible, pluralistic approach to studying democratic erosion, one that does not assume that

mechanisms discovered in one country can be easily transferred to others, or that mechanisms which are confirmed in one country will necessarily apply to that country at a different time. Such an approach opens the door to more nuanced theorization that takes into account the diversity of political environments and historical contexts in which democratic erosion occurs. In this way, the dissertation not only contributes empirical evidence to the literature but also pushes the scholarship toward more sophisticated theoretical and methodological approaches that are better suited to understanding the complexities of contemporary democratic crises.

Ultimately, the importance of testing theoretical perspectives in multiple settings cannot be overstated. As democratic backsliding becomes an increasingly global concern, researchers must ensure that their theoretical frameworks are applicable in a variety of contexts. This dissertation lays the groundwork for more comprehensive and context-sensitive research by demonstrating the benefits of cross-national comparative studies and emphasizing the need for careful consideration of contextual factors when developing theories of democratic erosion. By doing so, it helps to move the literature beyond one-size-fits-all explanations and toward more precise and adaptable models that can guide both scholarship and policy in addressing the challenges to democracy worldwide.

### **The Conceptual Reality of Support for Democratic Subversion**

In addition to contributing to the external validity (or invalidity) of theoretical mechanisms, this dissertation also contributes to the conceptual debate surrounding the definition and measurement of support for (un)democratic practices (see Claassen et al., 2024). To recall, this dissertation proposed an expanded operationalization of support for undemocratic practices, focusing on twelve core principles of democracy.

The results of the articles highlight the importance of such a broader conceptualization and for the measurement of a larger set of undemocratic practices. Indeed, the first article demonstrates that partisan misperceptions shape support for different undemocratic practices differently. This is also the case in the third article, where young people (compared to older individuals) are found to support some undemocratic practices more than others. The second article, while not relying on the specific operationalization presented in Chapter 3, still shows the importance of measuring support for different components of (un)democratic principles and institutions.

Taken together, these three studies offer comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding public support for democratic erosion. Such a more complete operationalization of support for undemocratic practices offers several key benefits for both theoretical and empirical research. First, it allows for a more nuanced understanding of how different democratic principles are perceived and supported by the public (see Chu et al., 2024). By expanding the conceptualization to encompass a wider range of democratic principles, researchers can indeed better capture variations in attitudes that may be obscured by narrower measures (for an example, see Braley et al., 2023; Graham & Svulik, 2020). This is particularly important given the findings of this dissertation, which indicate that support for different undemocratic practices varies across different demographic groups and political contexts.

Second, a larger and more complete operationalization of support for undemocratic practices strengthens the predictive power of empirical models by accounting for the multidimensional nature of support for democratic subversion (Claassen et al., 2024). As demonstrated in this dissertation, public attitudes toward democratic principles do not exist in isolation. Rather, they interact with various factors such as partisan identity, age, and political context. A more extensive measurement allows for the identification of distinct patterns and interrelationships that might

otherwise go unnoticed when using a more limited conceptual approach (see, for instance, Braley et al., 2023; Adserà et al., 2023).

Third, a broader operationalization can enhance the comparability of findings across different studies and political environments. One of the challenges in the study of democratic erosion is the context-dependence of certain mechanisms explaining support for undemocratic practices (see above). By using a more comprehensive set of indicators, scholars can develop a standardized approach that facilitates cross-national comparisons and mitigates the risk of producing results that are only applicable in specific political systems (such as the United States, Foa and Mounk, 2025). This ensures that theoretical models do not become overly tailored to particular case studies, thereby improving their generalizability.

Additionally, a comprehensive operationalization provides valuable insights for policymakers and democratic institutions seeking to counter democratic erosion. By identifying which specific undemocratic practices receive public support, governments and civil society organizations can develop targeted interventions aimed at reinforcing commitment to democratic norms (Voelkel et al., 2024). For instance, if certain undemocratic practices are more accepted among younger individuals, tailored civic education programs can be implemented to address these specific gaps in democratic support (see, for instance, Pasek et al., 2008). While this is a particularly unique contribution of the third article, the adoption of the more specific operationalization in the first and second articles provide additional evidence of this reality.

Finally, a more complete operationalization contributes to the refinement of existing theories on democratic resilience and backsliding (see Druckman, 2023; Gidron et al., 2025). The findings of this dissertation suggest that some theoretical mechanisms are universal, while others are highly context-dependent. A broad measurement approach allows for more rigorous testing of these

mechanisms, ultimately leading to a deeper understanding of when and why individuals support democratic erosion. This, in turn, can help scholars move beyond simplistic explanations and develop more robust theoretical frameworks that better reflect the complexity and multidimensionality of contemporary democratic challenges.

### **What This Dissertation Tells Us About Democracy (And Its Citizens)**

This dissertation makes significant contributions to the study of democracy, particularly in understanding how citizen support for democratic principles can erode under certain conditions. By integrating three distinct theoretical perspectives, it provides a more nuanced and comprehensive view of democratic resilience, challenging the assumption that public support for democracy is an inherent safeguard against democratic backsliding. The findings underscore the importance of recognizing that democratic institutions cannot rely solely on public attitudes to safeguard against erosion; instead, they must be designed to function independently of shifting public sentiments. This nuanced understanding of democratic support and backsliding is essential for both scholars and practitioners aiming to preserve democratic integrity.

Across the three studies, a central theme emerges: citizen support for democracy is not unconditional, nor is it uniform. Instead, individuals evaluate democracy through the lenses of their partisan identities, perceived material interests, and generational experiences (Druckman, 2023; Adserà et al., 2023; Foa and Mounk, 2019). This dissertation demonstrates that citizens, under certain conditions, may become permissive of undemocratic behaviors, even in consolidated democracies. In addition to the overarching contributions of the dissertation as a whole, each article provides its own specific theoretical and empirical contributions to their respective literatures. The following sections will summarize these.

## **The First Article: Partisan Misperceptions and Democratic Erosion**

The first article examined the relationship between partisan misperceptions and citizen support for undemocratic practices. Building on a growing body of literature that scrutinizes the role of ordinary citizens in democratic erosion (see, for example, Goodman, 2022; Mounk, 2018), I investigated whether misperceptions of opposing partisans' commitment to democracy fuel support for such practices in these three contexts. I argued that while previous research, particularly within the American context, has identified a trend where partisans develop biased views of their political opponents' commitment to democracy, and consequently exhibit increased support for anti-democratic practices, this phenomenon may be circumscribed to the hyperpolarized context of the United States (Finkel et al., 2020). In addition, and as mentioned above, I relied on an expanded conceptual definition and operationalization of support for undemocratic practices.

Individually, this study demonstrates that misperceptions of out-partisans' commitment to democracy do not robustly explain citizen support for democratic subversion in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. These results are notably inconsistent across different types of undemocratic practices. These findings make several contributions to the literature on the role of partisan misperceptions in driving public support for undemocratic practices. First, it provides a more externally valid evaluation of the democratic subversion hypothesis in three highly democratic and moderately polarized settings, moving beyond the predominant focus of previous research on the hyperpolarized context of the United States. Second, it expands the conceptual definition and measurement of undemocratic practices to include a wider range of norm-defying policies and behaviors that are not exclusively targeted at out-partisans. As I argued before, this reframing is crucial as it illuminates the nuanced ways in which democratic backsliding can be fueled by citizens in increasingly polarized societies, and it facilitates a more specific

understanding of which types of undemocratic actions citizens support due to partisan misperceptions.

The key findings and contributions of this research both challenge and expand the existing literature on partisan misperceptions and democratic subversion. The study reveals three key insights. First, the results suggest that the relationship between partisan misperceptions and undemocratic attitudes may be more salient in highly polarized bipartisan contexts such as the United States. In multiparty settings, political animosity may be more diffuse, distributed across multiple opponents rather than concentrated against a single opposing party. Moreover, the moderate levels of polarization in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom may account for the weaker associations observed in this study. Consistent with arguments made by Dassonneville (2023), the focus on the U.S. has also led scholars to underappreciate the role of non-partisans and cross-partisans in multiparty settings, where a significant proportion of the electorate may not possess a strong partisan identity.

Second, partisan misperceptions may primarily fuel support for undemocratic practices when coupled with an active process of democratic erosion perpetrated by political opponents. The mere perception that out-partisans are less committed to democracy may be insufficient to trigger an undemocratic backlash. The findings indeed suggest that partisan misperceptions may exert a more substantial impact in contexts where democratic norms are already experiencing active undermining, whether by political elites or through institutional changes, aligning with Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) theory of democratic backsliding. Overall, this first research article underscores the need for researchers to exercise greater care and attention in how they conceptualize and measure undemocratic practices as well as in which context they measure these. I contend that a more precise and expansive approach, which considers the multidimensionality of

undemocratic practices and the context-dependence of partisan-based theoretical mechanisms, will enable a more comprehensive understanding of why citizens support undemocratic practices.

### **The Second Article: Trading Democracy for Stability and Security**

The second article focuses on the extent to which citizens are willing to trade democracy for gains in alternate needs. Building on research by Adserà et al. (2023) and Neundorff and colleagues (2024), I investigate the factors influencing citizens' willingness to trade democratic principles for improvements in economic and physical security. While previous research has established that citizens are indeed willing to exchange democratic institutions for better economic and physical security, this study argues that this willingness is not uniform across all dimensions of democracy.

Specifically, the findings of the study demonstrate that citizens are less willing to trade elections and political rights, such as free speech, compared to other democratic institutions or principles. Conversely, I find that citizens are more willing to forgo checks and balances and political accountability in exchange for economic and physical security. These findings suggest that citizens are not equally willing to trade different dimensions of democracy for economic and physical security. Indeed, the results show that they are more reluctant to compromise on elections and political rights but are more open to trading away accountability mechanisms. This is in line with studies that demonstrate that people prioritize specific democratic components, viewing some as essential while deeming others as less critical (Chu, Williamson, and Yeung 2024; Wiesner, Bien, and Wilson 2024). This is particularly the case for those democratic dimensions that are more directly connected to citizens, either through participatory processes or by granting them certain rights (i.e., elections and freedom of speech) (Baviskar and Malone, 2004).

These findings make several contributions to the literature on democratic backsliding. First, it advances our understanding of citizen trade-offs by employing a more realistic conjoint experiment

that incorporates tangible instances of democratic erosion. Second, it highlights the importance of the multidimensional nature of democracy in shaping citizen tolerance for democratic erosion. Notably, it reveals that citizens do not weigh every dimension of democracy equally and are willing to trade some dimensions more than others, providing a nuanced theoretical and empirical perspective on public support for democratic erosion. By demonstrating that citizens prioritize certain democratic dimensions over others, this research helps explain why some attempts at democratic erosion face greater resistance than others. It also underscores the importance of considering the specific democratic institutions and norms that are under threat when analyzing public responses to democratic backsliding (particularly tolerance towards such threats).

### **The Third Article: Age-Based Differences in Democratic Attitudes**

Lastly, the third article provides cross-national evidence of age-based differences in democratic attitudes, revealing that younger generations exhibit lower levels of commitment to democratic norms than older generations. The study finds that young people are not only less supportive of democracy as a system but are also more tolerant of undemocratic practices such as voter suppression, executive aggrandizement, and restrictions on civil liberties.

Theoretically, the study differentiates between democratic apathy and democratic antipathy to understand the trends in democratic attitudes among youth. As extensively discussed, scholarly interpretations of these trends vary. Some argue that young people's weariness of democracy is performative and doesn't necessarily indicate a rejection of democratic ideals (Foa and Mounk 2016; Norris 2011; Claassen and Magalhães 2023). Yet, a growing body of research expresses concern about younger citizens' actual commitment to democracy, questioning the assumption that democratic disconnect doesn't translate to support for undemocratic alternatives (Foa and Mounk 2019; Frederiksen 2024b; Huttunen and Saikkonen 2023).

The results of this article clarify recent trends by demonstrating that younger citizens are shifting towards democratic antipathy. In other words, this article puts into question the traditional argument that younger individuals are simply “checking-out” of democracy by demonstrating that youth are also very much so “checking-in” to undemocratic practices. This finding has significant implications for the future trajectory of democratic governance, raising concerns that if younger citizens continue to exhibit lower democratic support, long-term generational shifts could weaken democratic institutions (and strengthen undemocratic alternatives) over time.

This research offers robust evidence that younger citizens in consolidated democracies are less supportive of democracy and increasingly tolerant of undemocratic practices. It complements previous work on youth and democracy, particularly by demonstrating that concerns about a shift towards illiberal and undemocratic politics are becoming a reality in stable democracies like Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States (see Foa and Mounk 2016). Furthermore, it establishes that young citizens’ negative attitudes towards democracy are accompanied by a growing acceptance of undemocratic alternatives. If unaddressed, this shift away from democratic norms among the youth could significantly contribute to the “slow death” of democracies worldwide (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this dissertation advances our understanding of the conditions under which citizens are willing to tolerate and support undemocratic practices. It reveals that democratic commitment is neither monolithic nor unconditional, and that partisan biases, generational shifts, and economic/crime trade-offs play a crucial role in shaping democratic attitudes. By integrating findings across three empirical studies, this research provides new insights into the mechanisms of

democratic erosion and contributes to ongoing debates about the resilience of democracy in the 21st century. Ultimately, these findings serve as both a warning and a call to action. Citizens may not be the robust line of defence against autocratization we once thought. Democracies must therefore actively work to reinforce their institutions and norms to withstand the pressures of polarization, generational change, and economic uncertainty.

Through three distinct yet interrelated studies, I expand our understanding of the mechanisms which explain why citizens sometimes support undemocratic practices. The study on partisan misperceptions reveals that while citizens often hold biased views of their political opponents' commitment to democracy, these misperceptions do not consistently translate into support for undemocratic practices. This suggests that the influence of partisan identity on democratic erosion is more nuanced than previously thought and is significantly shaped by the specific political context. The analysis of democratic trade-offs indicates that citizens are more willing to sacrifice certain democratic dimensions, such as checks and balances and political accountability, in exchange for economic and physical security. Conversely, they show a stronger preference for preserving the integrity of elections and safeguarding freedom of speech. This highlights a critical insight: citizens prioritize some aspects of democracy over others, and their willingness to tolerate democratic erosion varies accordingly. Thirdly, the examination of age-based differences in democratic attitudes uncovers a troubling trend: younger citizens, across consolidated democracies, exhibit lower levels of support for democracy and greater tolerance for undemocratic practices. This generational shift in democratic values has significant implications for the future of democratic governance, as it suggests a gradual erosion of support for democracy among future generations.

Taken together, these findings paint a complex picture of the challenges facing contemporary democracies. The erosion of trust in democratic institutions, coupled with the rise of illiberal tendencies, poses a significant threat to the stability and resilience of democratic governance. As citizens become more willing to trade democratic principles for competing interests, and as younger generations increasingly embrace undemocratic alternatives, the future of liberal democracy hangs in the balance. Substantially, this dissertation contributes to the academic agenda by highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of citizen support for democracy. It challenges the assumption that democratic values are deeply ingrained and immutable, demonstrating instead that they are contingent on a variety of individual and contextual factors. By identifying the specific conditions under which citizens are more likely to support undemocratic practices, this research provides valuable insights for policymakers and democratic institutions seeking to counter democratic erosion and strengthen democratic resilience.

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# Supplementary Information

## Certificate of Ethics Approval for Survey and Conjoint Experiment

17/09/2024	
<b>Université d'Ottawa</b> Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche	<b>University of Ottawa</b> Office of Research Ethics and Integrity
<b>CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE   CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL</b>	
<b>Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number</b>	S-09-24-10057
<b>Titre du projet / Project Title</b>	Citizen Support for Undemocratic Practices
<b>Type de projet / Project Type</b>	Thèse de doctorat / Doctoral thesis
<b>Statut du projet / Project Status</b>	Approuvé / Approved
<b>Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)</b>	17/09/2024
<b>Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)</b>	16/09/2025
<b>Équipe de recherche / Research Team</b>	
<b>Chercheur / Researcher Affiliation</b>	<b>Role</b>
Jean-Nicolas BORDELEAU École d'études politiques / School of Political Studies	Chercheur Principal / Principal Investigator
Daniel STOCKEMER École d'études politiques / School of Political Studies	Superviseur / Supervisor
<b>Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments</b>	