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The Demand Side of Democratic Backsliding: How Divergent Understandings of Democracy Shape Political Choice

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Abstract
Why do citizens fail to punish political candidates who violate democratic standards at the ballot box? Building on recent debates about heterogeneous democratic attitudes among citizens, we probe how divergent understandings of democracy shape citizens' ability to recognize democratic transgressions as such and, in turn, affect vote choice. We leverage a novel approach to estimate the behavioural consequences of such individual-level understandings of democracy via a candidate choice conjoint experiment in Poland, a democracy where elections remained competitive despite an extended episode of backsliding. Consistent with our argument, we find that respondents who adhere less strongly to liberal democratic norms tolerate democratic violations more readily. Conversely, voters with a stronger liberal understanding of democracy are more likely to punish non-liberal candidates, including co-partisan ones. Our study identifies political culture, particularly the lack of attitudinal consolidation around liberal democracy, as a missing variable in explaining continued voter support for authoritarian-leaning leaders.

Introduction

Democratic backsliding has become a major concern in recent years (Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Unlike democratic breakdowns, which are often characterized by external intervention or military coups, democratic backsliding occurs through an incremental erosion of democratic standards that may remain above the threshold towards full-fledged regime change (Waldner and Lust 2018). Such processes are generally driven by 'executive aggrandizement' (Bermeo 2016) or 'incumbent takeover' (Svolik 2015), whereby dominant executives gradually dismantle domestic checks and balances and civil liberties. In electoral democracies, citizens thus represent the last bulwark to resist undemocratic practices by elected leaders (Schedler 2019). This raises the puzzle of why – despite widespread support for democracy – citizens often fail to hold the government accountable for violations of liberal democratic principles (Svolik 2020; Aspinall et al. 2020; Fossati, Muhtadi and Warburton 2022).

Several recent studies explore partisan-based polarization as the central explanation for citizen tolerance towards democratic backsliding (Ahlquist et al. 2018; Orhan 2022), identifying a

'partisan double standard' (Graham and Svolik 2020) or 'democratic hypocrisy' (Simonovits, McCoy and Littvay 2022) that drives voters to punish democratic violations by candidates from their own party less harshly than others. At the same time, empirical findings on the impact of partisan loyalty upon tolerance for democratic transgressions are mixed (Carey et al. 2020), and have shown asymmetric effects across parties (Gidengil, Stolle and Bergeron-Boutin 2022; Carey et al. 2019) or even no effects at all (Broockman, Kalla and Westwood 2023). These uneven patterns indicate that an exclusive focus on partisan-related dynamics is insufficient to understand citizen behaviour in contexts of democratic backsliding.

Our study adopts a political culture perspective that has been so far neglected as a relevant factor in debates around democratic backsliding. It argues – and demonstrates empirically – that citizens' responses to democratic violations are shaped not by partisan considerations alone, but also by their relative commitment to liberal democratic norms. Building on a recent revival of debates around the existence of heterogeneous understandings of democracy among citizens (Davis, Gaddie and Goidel 2022; Chapman et al. 2024; Ahmed 2023), we contend that citizens' attitudes towards democracy either strengthen or mitigate their willingness to punish political candidates who engage in democratic violations, and thus shape their responses to democratic transgressions independently of the partisan dynamics singled out by earlier studies. We scrutinize this assumption by exploring the presence and strength of divergent understandings of democracy among citizens and probing how such differing understandings affect their responses to democratic backsliding. We advance that even in reasonably consolidated democracies, alternative views of democracy – including ones that conflict with certain fundamental liberal democratic principles, such as the separation of powers and independent media – coexist and inform citizens' evaluations of candidates and their eventual voting decisions.

The role of citizens' democratic attitudes in contexts of democratic backsliding has received scant attention so far. Instead, most studies seem to operate on the assumption of a stable notion of democracy in a given population, ignoring the presence of fundamentally different conceptions of democracy among citizens (Ahmed 2023). In a notable exception, Grossman et al. (2022) posit a 'majoritarian threat to liberal democracy' to explain voter apathy towards power grabs, arguing that citizens with majoritarian views may consider actions by the incumbent government as legitimate *per se*, thus failing to punish attempts to undermine the executive constraints central to liberal democracy. We extend this reasoning to propose an overarching argument about the linkages between democratic attitudes and political behaviour and their relevance in contexts of democratic backsliding. By investigating the effect of distinct understandings of democracy among citizens, we explicitly tackle the presence of contestation around the concept of democracy itself, which has been highlighted as a key oversight in studies of citizens' responses to democratic backsliding so far (Ahmed 2023).

We study the interplay between understandings of democracy and vote choice in Poland, a country that represents a paradigmatic case of democratic backsliding. To assess the linkages between citizens' understandings of democracy and their responses to democratic transgressions, we implement a pre-registered, well-powered candidate choice conjoint experiment among a representative sample of Polish citizens.[1] We leverage the novel approach of individual marginal component effects (IMCEs) (Zhirkov 2022) to measure how variations in individual-level democratic attitudes affect vote choice for candidates expressing differing democratic views. In methodological terms, our study is among the first to leverage IMCE estimates to study individual-level political behaviour. In doing so, we provide an illustration of the added value of IMCEs when it comes to investigating individual-level determinants of respondent preferences, as revealed in a conjoint experiment. We complement this analysis with additional tests to discriminate between the two causal mechanisms – liberal democratic commitment and value

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[1]Our time-stamped preregistration is available online at https://osf.io/f69dy/https://osf.io/f69dy/. We include a shortened version of the pre-analysis plan in the Supplementary Material.

congruence – that we posit as potential linkages between citizens' understandings of democracy and their responses to democratic backsliding.

Analyzing democratic backsliding in a European, multi-party setting, our study contributes to a growing debate about the ability of citizens to act as democratic bulwarks in the face of executive takeover. Our findings point to a considerable heterogeneity in democratic views among Polish voters that leads parts of the electorate to overlook democratic transgressions at the ballot box. Controlling for partisanship and socio-demographic covariates, we show that divergent democratic attitudes have a significant impact on responses to democratic violations in the Polish context: the more voters are committed to liberal democratic norms, the more harshly they punish candidates who deviate from these. These findings suggest that deep-seated variation in democratic attitudes among the citizenry plays an important role in explaining the ongoing success of illiberal politics and the attendant deepening of democratic backsliding over several electoral cycles. Focusing on partisan dynamics alone risks overlooking the persistent heterogeneity of citizens' democratic attitudes, even in reasonably advanced democracies, which represents an important vulnerability for the democratic system.

We begin by theorizing the potential linkages between democratic attitudes and voter responses to democratic transgressions. The following section provides a brief overview of the Polish case. We then detail our research design and, in particular, our measurement of divergent understandings of democracy and their impact on candidate assessments. The empirical section presents our findings with respect to the aggregate relationship between democratic attitudes and candidate preferences and the individual-level patterns linking these two dimensions. We also address the role of partisanship when it comes to voters' responses to non-liberal candidates. The conclusion summarizes our main insights and discusses their wider theoretical and practical implications.

Theorizing the Demand Side of Democratic Backsliding

Democratic backsliding is generally studied as an elite-driven process whereby authoritarian-leaning leaders actively manipulate the rules of the democratic game in their favour and secure voters' continued approval through buy-outs or ideological appeals (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Bartels 2023; Matovski 2021; Medzihorsky and Lindberg 2023). The supply side is certainly crucial when it comes to implementing democratic transgressions and offering justifications for undemocratic practices. However, since in democracies it is citizens who can confirm and oust politicians from office at the ballot box, we contend that the demand side – in particular, political culture and citizens' views of democracy – is just as vital.

For citizens to play the role of effective safeguards against executive aggrandizement and the resultant democratic erosion, there is an important precondition: a shared understanding that liberal democracy is worth defending against the incumbent's attempts to weaken and undermine executive constraints (Weingast 1997; Saikkonen and Christensen 2023). Political culture has been cast as central to democratic consolidation, with democratic attitudes among citizens a key determinant of regime stability (Pridham 1995; Linz and Stepan 1996). Building on earlier seminal contributions on the importance of mass attitudes towards democracy (Almond and Verba 1963; Easton 1975; Lipset 1959), a spate of recent studies draws on the availability of cross-national survey data on citizens' support for democracy to confirm the relevance of political culture for democratic stability (Mauk 2020; Claassen 2020; Grossman et al. 2022; Fossati, Muhtadi and Warburton 2022).

Yet despite an abundant body of literature on political culture and its broader systemic relevance, citizens' democratic attitudes have so far largely been overlooked as an explanatory factor in processes of democratic backsliding. In their review of theories addressing democratic backsliding, Waldner and Lust (2018, 99) even reject political culture outright on the grounds that

the same variable cannot simultaneously account for the initial deepening and subsequent erosion of democracy. We claim that this logic is compelling only if we suppose that a stable and homogeneous political culture in each country would drive democratization in one or the other direction. This premise stands in direct contradiction to a burgeoning literature that highlights persistent divergence in citizens' understandings of democracy (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007; Chu and Huang 2010; Carlin 2011; Canache 2012; Davis, Gaddie and Goidel 2022) and has been singled out as a key limitation of existing studies seeking to explain citizen behaviour in contexts of democratic backsliding (Ahmed 2023, 9).

We argue that it is this very heterogeneity of democratic attitudes in a given population that explains why individual citizens may be more or less prone to vigorously defending liberal democratic norms when faced with a real-life, multidimensional election situation. Macro-level studies of the linkage between political culture and regime type fail to capture this relationship for two reasons: first, they tend to rely either on overly generic survey items to probe mass support for democracy (Wuttke, Gavras and Schoen 2022; Foa and Mounk 2016) or to focus exclusively upon support for a battery of liberal items (Claassen et al. 2024). Second, their tendency to aggregate democratic attitudes at the country level (Welzel 2021) masks the diversity of democratic views within the population. As a result, political culture tends to be viewed as a stable background factor that tracks rather than shapes democratic outcomes.

We adopt a different view: if citizens' understandings of democracy are divergent, this represents a key vulnerability of the political system to democratic subversion. This basic assumption informs our theoretical expectations regarding the linkages between understandings of democracy and citizens' responses to democratic backsliding. Where citizens' support for liberal democracy is weak or unevenly developed, a share of the electorate becomes open to majoritarian or illiberal appeals that have been shown to play a crucial role in backsliding elites' electoral strategies (Wunsch forthcoming: Ch. 5; Haggard and Kaufman 2021). Thus, while authoritarian-leaning elites remain the ultimate source of variation in democratic outcomes across countries and over time, heterogeneous understandings of democracy in the population offer fertile ground for their appeals and thus represent an independent explanatory factor in understanding the emergence and persistence of democratic backsliding. Specifically, we argue that citizens' views of democracy shape their evaluations of competing candidates and thus affect their electoral choice and, as a result, whether or not authoritarian-leaning elites can pursue their programme of democratic subversion.

From Understandings of Democracy to Support for Political Candidates

Our main argument posits that political culture – specifically, citizens' heterogeneous understandings of democracy – shapes political behaviour and, in particular, vote choice in contexts of democratic backsliding in ways that enable authoritarian-leaning elites to access and retain power despite engaging in violations of liberal democratic standards. At the macro level, this implies that democratic backsliding is likely to result where divergent understandings of democracy among the citizenry meet political elites willing to exploit such heterogeneous attitudes to retain their grip on power. Our study theorizes and empirically explores the micro-level foundations of this overarching argument.

Earlier explorations of heterogeneous understandings of democracy among citizens have often focused on a wide range of divergent conceptualizations. In their pioneering study in this field, Schedler and Sarsfield (2007) explore 'democrats with adjectives' as a mirror image of earlier debates around 'democracies with adjectives' (Collier and Levitsky 1997). Focusing on Mexico, they distinguish six groups of respondents – liberal democrats, intolerant democrats, paternalistic democrats, homophobic democrats, exclusionary democrats, and ambivalent non-democrats – with only the first group fully in line with liberal democracy. In a similar effort, a comparative study among twelve Latin American countries identifies groups of citizens based on their support

for polyarchy, pitting those who support all five dimensions of polyarchy (the 'polyarchs') against four mixed profiles of power constrainers, power checkers, power delegators, and power restrainers (Carlin and Singer 2011). Most recently, Davis, Gaddie and Goidel (2022) used a combination of open- and closed-ended survey questions to detect latent classes of indifferent respondents, proceduralists, moderates, and social democrats in the USA.

While these studies have the merit of highlighting the presence of distinct understandings of democracy in a given population, their main limitation consists in their case-specific nature, which makes it hard to draw insights beyond the specific context in which the typologies were developed. Adopting a more deductive approach, Ferrín (2016) conducted a comparative study of Europeans' attitudes towards democracy that probes citizens' support for three alternative models of democracy: liberal democracy, focused on the electoral process and the rule of law; social democracy, articulated around distributive justice and social and economic rights; and direct democracy, emphasizing direct legislation by citizens. Drawing on a comprehensive item battery they fielded within the European Social Survey (ESS), Kriesi and Morlino (2016, 308) conclude that despite differences in the relative emphasis upon the three main models of democracy tested empirically, 'the basic principles of liberal democracy are universally endorsed across Europe'. A forthcoming update of the analysis based on a more recent wave of ESS data confirms the continued centrality of free and fair elections and the rule of law for Europeans' understandings of democracy but notes a partial erosion in support for other elements such as the protection of minority rights (Hernandez, forthcoming).

We adopt a similar approach by zooming in on three predefined categories of democratic attitudes. Whereas Kriesi and Morlino (2016) explore citizens' support for distinct conceptions of democracy that all qualify as equally democratic, we are interested in differentiating between conceptions that may grant more or less leeway to elected elites seeking to expand their executive powers by dismantling democratic checks and balances. We distinguish these three conceptions primarily based on the supposed source of democratic legitimacy.

Our baseline conception of democracy is a *liberal* understanding that goes beyond a general regime preference for democracy to embrace pluralism, executive constraints, as well as equal rights and civil liberties for all citizens (O'Donnell 1998). In contexts of democratic backsliding, it is typically the liberal aspects of democracy, most notably minority rights protection and various forms of constraints on the executive, that come under pressure. The main conflict line thus runs between liberal and non-liberal forms of democracy rather than between electoral vs. non-electoral regime types.

The second conception of democracy we include in our analysis picks up on the 'majoritarian threat to liberal democracy' identified by Grossman et al. (2022). Reflecting a populist emphasis on power lying with 'the people', voters holding *majoritarian* views consider decisions supported by the political majority as democratic *per se*, including when they go against central precepts of liberal democratic conceptions such as pluralism and minority protection (Grigoriadis 2018; Urbinati 2017). As a result, they grant the elected government considerable leeway to limit executive constraints or pursue critical media in an effort to implement its political programme, making them potentially more open to tolerating political leaders who undermine traditional checks and balances.

Finally, we add a conception that has been qualified as an *authoritarian* view of democracy, according to which the legitimacy of a political system derives primarily from its ability to maintain social order and prevent chaos. Earlier studies qualify such 'authoritarian notions of democracy' as 'democracy misunderstood' (Kirsch and Welzel 2019) or 'democracy confused' (Kruse, Ravlik and Welzel 2019) to signal their incompatibility with liberal democratic orientations. While an authoritarian understanding of democracy may, therefore, appear as a conceptual oxymoron, authoritarian attitudes have been shown to empirically exist among citizens in many democracies (Singh and Dunn 2013), including in Europe (Vasilopoulos and Lachat 2018), Asia (Dore 2014), and Latin America (Cohen and Smith 2016).

By studying the effects of diverse understandings of democracy on citizens' political behaviour, we respond to calls to investigate how the strength of democratic beliefs (Carlin 2018, 419) and the liberal-democratic quality of citizens' regime preferences (Wuttke, Gavras and Schoen 2022) relate to vote choice and eventual democratic outcomes. We ask: how do divergent understandings of democracy shape vote choice in contexts of democratic backsliding? We posit two distinct mechanisms that may account for the supposed linkage between understandings of democracy and political behaviour at the ballot box.

On the one hand, the relationship may be uniquely driven by citizens who display high levels of support for liberal democratic conceptions. Such individuals can be expected to be particularly adamant about seeing the liberal dimension of democracy protected by political candidates and, thus, are more prone than others to punish candidates for holding alternative views. By contrast, respondents with majoritarian or authoritarian attitudes can be thought to prioritize alternative features in a candidate's profile. We thus posit *liberal democratic commitment* as the first mechanism linking understandings of democracy to vote choice:

> **H1a (liberal democratic commitment hypothesis)**: Respondents with stronger liberal understandings of democracy are more likely to reward candidates expressing liberal positions and to punish those expressing non-liberal positions.

On the other hand, the relationship between democratic attitudes and political behaviour may be based on a more general *congruence* between voters' understandings of democracy and the democratic positions expressed by political candidates. Such value congruence has been amply studied to explain the linkage between citizens' democratic values and regime type (Almond and Verba 1963; Welzel 2007, 2021) at the macro level, with citizen demand for democracy and civil liberties thought to create pressures to adjust the supply of such freedoms by the political system and elites (Welzel and Klingemann, 2007, 2008). Zooming in on the micro-level relationship between voters and candidates' democratic views, we expect an overlap between the two to drive vote choice in this case, with respondents preferring candidates whose positions mirror their own understanding of democracy, irrespective of whether this is liberal, majoritarian, or authoritarian. We therefore hypothesize:

> **H1b (congruence hypothesis)**: Respondents are more likely to prefer candidates whose democratic positions are congruent with their own understanding of democracy.

In sum, we expect divergent understandings of democracy among citizens to affect their positioning in electoral contests when competing candidates express a range of democratic positions, some of which openly conflict with liberal democratic norms. We posit two mechanisms that may explain these linkages, namely citizens' specific commitment to liberal democratic norms or the more general congruence between citizens' understandings of democracy and the democratic positions expressed by political candidates. To account for partisan-related dynamics, we also assess the interplay between understandings of democracy and partisan preferences and the relevance of partisan voting in explaining respondents' assessments of competing candidates and, notably, their rejection of non-liberal candidates. We expect such dynamics, where present, to act in parallel and thus in a complementary fashion to our emphasis upon democratic attitudes.

Polish Democracy at a Crossroads

Most studies on citizens' views and mass polarization in the context of democratic backsliding have focused on the bipartisan context of the USA (Graham and Svolik 2020; Simonovits, McCoy and Littvay 2022; Grossman et al. 2022; Carey et al. 2019; Gidengil, Stolle and Bergeron-Boutin

2022). The presence of deep partisan polarization in this setting may have led scholars to privilege partisan-based explanations of citizens' responses to backsliding while potentially overlooking alternative dynamics that drive voters to support (or oppose) candidates endorsing non-liberal democratic views. Our study focuses empirically on the case of Poland, a country similarly characterized by a high degree of partisan polarization but which boasts a multi-party setting. This offers citizens a broader range of options than simply supporting or rejecting the incumbent party representative by opening the possibility of defecting to an ideologically closer alternative candidate.

Poland was initially hailed as an exemplar of democratic transformation, but from 2015 onward shifted toward becoming a prototype of executive aggrandizement under the Law and Justice Party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, or PiS) (Buštíková and Guasti 2017; Bakke and Sitter 2022; Sadurski 2018; Solska 2020). PiS swiftly proceeded to remodel the judicial system and bring public media under government control, establishing what country experts have qualified as a 'purely majoritarian democracy' (Sadurski 2018, 3) or a 'ruthlessly majoritarian' government style bent on dismantling any constraints on the executive (Fomina and Kucharczyk 2016, 58). As of 2016, Poland was downgraded from 'liberal' to 'electoral democracy' according to the Varieties of Democracy regime type indicator (Lührmann, Tannenberg and Lindberg 2018). Freedom House began classifying the country as a 'semi-consolidated' rather than a consolidated democracy following the reelection of the PiS party in 2019 (Freedom House 2020).

At the same time, Poland has been facing deepening political and societal polarization (Tworzecki 2019; Fomina 2019). Socioeconomic cleavages tend to map onto partisan divides, with the gradual emergence of 'two roughly equal nationalist-populist and centrist-liberal camps' (Markowski 2016, 1,316). The shared religiosity and right-wing orientation that characterized both PiS and Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*, or PO) electorates in 2005 has given way to a much more clear-cut ideological division between the two camps since then (Fomina 2019, 86). In the wake of the 2019 parliamentary elections, PiS predominantly represents people with lower education levels, older people, and rural residents, whereas PO's electorate is constituted primarily of urban residents and those holding high professional status and university degrees (Markowski 2020).

In sum, Poland represents a democracy at a crossroads. Significant steps towards an erosion of democratic standards were undertaken under the previous PiS government, but elections have remained reasonably competitive, as confirmed in the October 2023 parliamentary elections that enabled the erstwhile opposition led by PO to form a viable government. In light of the increasing pressure on judicial independence and free media under PiS rule, citizens have effectively stood centre-stage as potential safeguards against a further dismantling of checks and balances and a full breakdown of democracy. This sensitive stage in the process of democratic backsliding makes Poland a particularly promising case in which to probe the linkages between understandings of democracy and candidate choice. At the same time, deep partisan polarization makes Poland one of the most likely candidates for explanations related to partisan considerations. Finding evidence for our alternative explanation based on divergent democratic attitudes among citizens in this context would, therefore, suggest our findings are likely to travel to other comparable contexts of democratic threat.

Research Design: An Experimental Study in Poland

To examine to what extent divergent understandings of democracy play a role in voter preferences for candidates with varying democratic values, we posit that political candidates in democracies not only represent different policy preferences but may also stand for distinct system-level preferences to which voters respond. Our research design measures such distinct understandings of democracy at the citizen level and integrates corresponding statements by politicians into a

Table 1. Democratic attributes and levels

Attribute	Levels	Concept
Judicial appointments	*Liberal*: Judges should be selected based on cross-party consensus.	Judicial independence
	Majoritarian: Judges should be selected by the government.	
	Authoritarian: Judges should be selected by the leader of the ruling party.	
Role of public media	*Liberal*: The role of public media is to report independently on political developments.	Media pluralism
	Majoritarian: The role of public media is to justify government policy towards the wider public.	
	Authoritarian: The role of public media is to defend government policy against criticism.	

paired conjoint experiment that asks respondents to choose among two competing candidates. We first describe our study design. We then explain the measurement of the dependent variable, highlighting the advantages of using individual marginal component effects (IMCE) over a more conventional approach based on average marginal component effects (AMCEs). Next, we describe the measurement of understandings of democracy, our independent variable. Finally, we present the empirical strategy we use to probe our hypotheses.

Study Design

Our analytical approach leverages a candidate choice conjoint experiment. This design allows us to integrate alternative elements alongside the democratic positions in candidates' profiles to capture the potential trade-offs in which voters engage (Schedler 2019; Svolik 2020). The resulting multidimensional set-up allows us to assess the weight of democratic positions when it comes to respondents' evaluations of competing candidates. We are thus able to probe the linkages between divergent understandings of democracy and citizens' responses to concrete manifestations of democratic backsliding while controlling for partisan-related factors.

In our study, we placed respondents into a hypothetical election situation and asked them to choose between two competing profiles of candidates running for seats in the national lower house (*Sejm*).[2] We use the conjoint setting to effectively manipulate elite behaviour – the supply side of our argument – by varying the positions in our candidate profiles regarding the nomination of judges and the role of public media. We strive to capture divergent views of democracy on the elite side by formulating the levels for the two democratic attributes in line with the liberal, majoritarian, and authoritarian understandings we developed for the citizens' perspective. Table 1 displays our democratic attributes along with the levels reflecting distinct understandings of democracy.

Our selected attributes concern two elements – judicial independence and media freedom – that are crucial to liberal democracy but also offer a range of options as to how they may be implemented in a democratic system. Using two distinct democratic attributes allows us to conduct two separate tests of our argument regarding the linkages between understandings of democracy and voter responses to democratic transgressions. Our transgressions capture violations of liberal democratic norms rather than outright violations of the law (Ahmed 2023), thus enabling us to probe the overall salience of candidates' democratic views as well as the relative impact of different variations to strong liberal views upon respondents' candidate choice. For judicial appointments, we complement the liberal position that judges should be based on cross-party consensus with alternatives that foresee a selection by the government (majoritarian) or by

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[2]See Figure A.1 for the introduction text to the candidate choice tasks.

the leader of the ruling party (authoritarian). Regarding the role of public media, we let candidates express the liberal view that their role consists of reporting independently on political developments, suggest that they should justify government policy towards the wider public (majoritarian), or claim their role is to defend government policy against criticism (authoritarian).

We deliberately choose more subtle deviations from liberal democracy to model the gradual nature of democratic backsliding, which consists precisely of rather discrete ways of chipping away at checks and balances that only jointly amount to dismantling democratic standards (Scheppele 2013). Moreover, we decided to refrain from including positions so extreme that they would draw near universal condemnation, making it difficult to discriminate whether such condemnation is driven by an actual commitment to liberal democratic norms or due to considerations of social desirability. As discussed below, despite their subtlety, respondents are able to discriminate among the three distinct levels of democratic positions we introduce for our two democratic attributes (see also Appendix Figure B.3).

We partnered with the Warsaw-based market research company Inquiry – YouGov's representative for Central and Eastern Europe – to recruit a representative sample of Polish respondents based on age, gender, geographic origin, and vote choice at the last national election for our online survey, into which we embedded our conjoint experiment. The survey was conducted between 12 July and 12 August 2021 ($N = 2,910$). As specified in our preregistration, we removed speeders and those respondents who failed attention checks from our sample (Berinsky, Margolis and Sances 2014), bringing the final sample we used for our analysis to 1,979 respondents. We report measures of sample representativeness for the final sample and full results for alternative sample specifications in the Online Appendix (Tables A.2 and A.3 and Section B.5).

We asked respondents to complete twelve discrete choice tasks, each time choosing between two candidates (forced-choice) and rating each candidate on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disapprove' (1) to 'strongly approve' (7). Each candidate profile was identified with a neutral label ('Candidate A' vs. 'Candidate B') and displayed randomized information on seven attributes, with the order of attributes fully randomized for each choice task. Alongside candidates' respective democratic views,[3] our competing profiles contained information on their gender, age, policy positions, and partisanship. For partisanship, we presented respondents with a mix of candidates from all parties or party coalitions that scored above 5 per cent of vote share according to polls in June 2021 when the survey design was finalized. Choice situations also included runoffs between candidates of the same party background. We include the full attribute table in Table A.2 in the Appendix.

Dependent Variable: Candidate Evaluations

According to our theoretical argument, divergent understandings of democracy affect the extent to which citizens are likely to overlook democratic transgressions when evaluating competing candidates. We use our conjoint experiment to measure the weight of candidates' democratic attributes in individual respondents' candidate ratings by computing *individual* marginal component effects (IMCEs) (Zhirkov 2022). Respondents' IMCEs then serve as a measure of our dependent variable. Before we explain the construction and purpose of IMCEs in more detail, we first discuss the caveats of existing candidate choice experiments that rely on *average* marginal component effects (AMCEs).

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[3]We deliberately choose to fully randomize all candidate profiles to meet a key assumption of estimating the key outcome variables of our analysis, the individual marginal component effect (IMCE; for elaboration, see below). While full randomization ensures the internal validity of our outcome variable, it is important to note that respondents will be more familiar with the Law and Justice Party questioning independent media and judiciaries. However, we emphasized the hypothetical nature of candidate choices in our experiment and asked them to base their choices on the information provided in the conjoint tasks. This is in line with similar candidate choice experiments featuring undemocratic candidates (for example, Frederiksen 2022; Saikkonen and Christensen 2023).

Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) and their Limits

Our design seeks to estimate how much importance respondents assign to multidimensional candidate characteristics. First, we replicate the traditional approach by computing AMCEs for our candidate choice experiment (see Appendix Figure B.3). AMCEs allow researchers to estimate the effect of an individual treatment component over the joint distribution of the remaining attributes (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014, 10). Focusing on the attributes of the judiciary and media, the AMCEs suggest that, on average, respondents approve less of candidates who make majoritarian or authoritarian statements compared to liberal ones.[4]

However, AMCEs do not allow us to draw inferences about the individual level. Specifically, the observed pattern may reflect a shared adherence to reasonably liberal democratic attitudes across our sample. However, AMCEs may just as well mask considerable divergence of choice behaviour within our sample, with some respondents punishing democratic transgressions very harshly, while others are indifferent or even approve of candidates expressing non-liberal democratic views. Yet such divergent behaviours at the individual level underpin the causal mechanism we seek to probe in our study, leading us to adopt a recently proposed alternative approach to conjoint analysis via *individual* marginal component effects.

Individual Marginal Component Effects (IMCEs) as a Measure of Individual-level Candidate Preferences

Individual marginal component effects (IMCEs) overcome some of the limitations of analyses focused on AMCEs (Zhirkov 2022). In this approach, each respondent rates a relatively high number of profiles (in our case twenty-four candidate profiles in twelve election runoffs) on a rating scale,[5] allowing us to estimate the effects of each candidate attribute level on the respondent's rating for candidates. For instance, if a respondent repeatedly rates liberal candidate profiles more highly, their IMCE on the corresponding liberal attribute will be higher. Substantially, higher values indicate a stronger preference for liberal democratic candidates. We detect this preference by regressing a respondent's ratings of the twenty-four candidates on each of the candidate's attributes separately:

$$\mathbf{y}_i = \alpha_{il} + \pi_{il}\mathbf{X}'_{il} + \varepsilon_{il}, \tag{1}$$

where $\mathbf{y}_i$ is a vector of ratings for each candidate profile made by respondent i, $\mathbf{X}'_{il}$ a vector of values of attribute l shown to respondent i, and ε_{il} a vector of respondent-specific errors.[6] We define $\hat{\pi}_{il}$ as the IMCE for attribute l. In our study, we focus on individuals' IMCEs for the two attributes relating to candidates' statements towards democracy (that is, judicial appointments and the role of public media).[7] To assess the empirical relevance of congruence between respondents' and candidates' democratic views for respondents' candidate evaluations, we regress the IMCEs of the two democratic attributes on the three understandings of democracy. This allows us to examine the relative importance of congruence separately for all three understandings, enabling us to evaluate whether only respondents with strong liberal democratic attitudes lend greater weight to candidates' democratic views or whether there is a generalized preference for candidates expressing democratic views that are congruent with those of the respondent. As

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[4]Note that the largest effect on candidate choices can be attributed to shared partisanship between the respondent and candidate profiles.

[5]IMCEs are computed with candidate ratings instead of choices to receive more reliable estimates at the individual level. We compare the AMCEs on the candidate rating with choices and find no differences in the relative weight of attributes (see Online Appendix B.2.3). Furthermore, we implement a machine-learning estimation approach developed by Robinson and Duch (2024) in Online Appendix D.2 that allows for binary outcomes, and find patterns consistent with the rating scale analysis.

[6]In Online Appendix D.1, we also bootstrap the IMCE estimates and find similar results.

[7]Note that due to full randomization, IMCE estimates for each attribute are independent of each other.

mentioned above, we observe the ratings separately for each of the two democratic attributes in order to assess how the area in which a democratic transgression occurs may concern respondents to a different extent.

Previous research has proposed to divide a population into subgroups of interest (for example, based on gender or partisanship) and study average conjoint behaviour separately for these groups (Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley 2020). However, defining such subgroups for our attitudinal concept of understandings of democracy would require imposing arbitrary thresholds to distinguish different subgroups from one another. IMCEs, by contrast, enable us to assess different understandings of democracy on a continuous scale and examine their relationship with political choice. Besides, aggregate analyses usually allow for examining only one covariate of interest at a time. However, we often expect the covariate of interest to vary with other covariates, raising concerns about omitted variable bias.[8] By contrast, determining to what extent individual respondents care about candidates' stances toward democracy allows us to consider a range of explanatory variables jointly in a regression framework.[9]

IMCEs rely on the same set of assumptions as AMCEs. That is, only when the assumptions of (1) stability and no carryover effects, (2) no profile-order effects, and (3) completely independent randomization of the profiles in a conjoint experiment hold can IMCEs be estimated independently for each respondent (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014; Zhirkov 2022). For our candidate choice experiment, we verified assumption 1 (see Online Appendix B.2.2), and assumptions 2 and 3 are true by design, allowing us to proceed with estimating IMCEs. In Online Appendix D.2, we also implement an alternative machine-learning approach to estimating IMCEs (Robinson and Duch 2024) and find similar results.

Independent Variable: Understandings of Democracy

Empirical studies often equate democratic commitment with citizens' support for the generic concept of democracy (Wuttke, Gavras and Schoen 2022; Foa and Mounk 2016, 2017). This narrow understanding – and corresponding measurement – of democratic commitment is increasingly recognized as a key limitation in accurately assessing citizens' democratic beliefs (Inglehart 2003; Ananda and Bol 2021; Alonso 2016; König, Siewert, and Ackermann 2022). To explain heterogeneity in individuals' evaluations of candidates expressing different views of democracy, we instead implement a more fine-grained measurement model to gauge individuals' respective scores for distinct understandings of democracy. We introduce the resulting individual factor scores as independent variables into a regression model, controlling for party preference and socioeconomic variables. In essence, our research design thus assesses to what extent respondents' understandings of democracy in the abstract translate into a willingness to punish democratic transgressions in a concrete candidate choice situation.

To measure respondents' understandings of democracy, we revise and expand an item battery from the World Value Survey (WVS) (Haerpfer et al. 2020) and implement the measurement model outlined in our preregistration, asking respondents to rate how essential they find each item to be for democracy on a scale from 1 to 7. We pretested the majoritarian and authoritarian items for internal validity and statistical benchmarks for confirmatory factor analysis in a dedicated pretest among a smaller sample of Polish respondents. Table 2 reports the retained items as included in our preregistration, while Table A.4 in the Appendix compares our items to those included in the WVS.

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[8]For instance, when a population is divided into partisan subgroups and average choice behaviour is compared against each other, one could not rule out that age confounds the behavioural differences found for different partisan groups.

[9]Another advantage of the IMCE approach is that analyzing separate subgroups substantially decreases statistical power, whereas the IMCE approach allows us to examine the relationship between understandings of democracy and political choice among all respondents.

Table 2. Item battery of understandings of democracy

Liberal understanding	L1: People choose their leaders in free elections.
	L2: Civil rights protect people from state oppression.
	L3: Women have the same rights as men.
Majoritarian understanding	M1: The majority can always overrule the minority.
	M2: Any law can be changed if there is a majority for it.
	M3: The minority must accept the will of the majority in all circumstances.
Authoritarian understanding	A1: The government uses violence to enforce public order.
	A2: Elections only serve to confirm the ruling party in office.
	A3: The government limits civic freedoms to rule efficiently.

Based on these observed items, we implement an ordered confirmatory factor analysis with three separate latent variables corresponding to a liberal, majoritarian, and authoritarian understanding of democracy.[10] We compute individual factor scores for each latent variable based on the model. Since the different understandings may be correlated with one another,[11] we allow covariance between the three latent variables and choose to assess the relative strength of each respondent's support for the three distinct understandings of democracy separately. The model indicates a good model fit ($\chi^2 = 175.91$, CFI $= 0.99$, RMSEA $= 0.06$), suggesting that our measures are internally valid (see details of measurement model in Online Appendix B.1). In Online Appendix B.3, we implement an exploratory factor analysis and find strong support for the internal validity of our measures.

To further probe the robustness of our measurement, we assess to what extent respondents' understandings of democracy correspond to their evaluation of the democratic attributes we included in the conjoint. We asked respondents outside the actual candidate choice experiment to rate how democratic they thought each of the statements towards judges and media was (see Online Appendix B.7). The observed patterns indicate that our independent measure of respondents' understandings of democracy maps onto their evaluation of the items we chose to include in the conjoint, making these a salient measure of the congruence between respondent-level and candidate-level democratic views.

In another test of our measurement, we examine the extent to which divergent understandings of democracy correspond to party preferences. Earlier experimental findings indicate that citizens may rationalize democratic violations when they are carried out by an actor whose policy preferences align with their own (Krishnarajan 2023). Such behaviour is particularly prevalent in contexts of democratic backsliding, allowing citizens to alter their very perception of what is democratic or undemocratic to convince themselves that they are getting both their preferred policy *and* democracy. A previous study in Poland has suggested that backsliding leaders are able to maintain themselves in power precisely because their leadership style aligns with a distinct understanding of democracy among their electorate (Reykowski 2020). In this scenario, partisanship would largely overlap with distinct democratic attitudes, potentially undermining our argument that these attitudes represent a distinct dimension influencing citizens' voting choices. Besides, a recent study examining the role of incumbency shows that citizens can adjust their understanding of democracy to their partisan interest, with incumbent supporters typically more majoritarian in their orientation than opposition supporters (Bryan 2023). We therefore examine to what extent partisan preferences are associated with respondents' understandings of democracy in ways that might affect their responses to democratic violations.

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[10]Cronbach's alpha for liberal items $= 0.703$, for majoritarian items $= 0.653$, and for authoritarian items $= 0.747$. See Appendix B.3 for an exploratory factor analysis on the understandings of democracy items.

[11]Indeed, as the measurement model indicates (Table B.1), liberal and authoritarian understandings are negatively correlated (-0.37, $p < 0.001$). By contrast, authoritarian and majoritarian understandings are positively correlated (0.27, $p < 0.001$). Liberal and majoritarian understandings co-vary only marginally (0.04, $p < 0.001$).

Table 3. Variance explained by party preferences in ANOVA models for a liberal, majoritarian, and authoritarian understanding of democracy

	Liberal	Majoritarian	Authoritarian
Variance explained by party preference	3.51%	2.66%	1.40%

To do so, we investigate what percentage of variance in understandings of democracy can be explained by party preferences. If an overwhelming share of the variance in understandings of democracy were to be explained by partisan affiliation, this would provide strong support for the claim that party supporters in backsliding countries substantially differ in the notions of democracy to which they subscribe. Table 3 breaks down the variance in understandings of democracy explained by partisan affiliation. Specifically, 3.51, 2.75, and 1.48 per cent of the variance in liberal, majoritarian, and authoritarian understanding scores, respectively, can be attributed to differences in partisanship. This suggests that, although some differences in understandings of democracy are linked to party preference, a significant portion of these differences transcends partisan groups, indicating that citizens within the same party have varied understandings of democracy.

Lastly, we consider the possibility that the Polish government party PiS disseminated a more majoritarian and authoritarian narrative of what democracy constitutes and thereby increased its supporters' endorsement of such an understanding of democracy. To examine this possibility, we draw on a survey panel collected before and after the Polish PiS government came to power in 2015 (see Appendix C). These data, in turn, allow us to compare levels of support for different notions of democracy over time and whether PiS supporters or even the entire Polish electorate became more supportive of non-liberal understandings of democracy once this party entered power. Our results do not provide evidence that government supporters or voters in general became more supportive of majoritarian or authoritarian notions of democracy before and after PiS assumed power in 2015, suggesting that the government did not significantly shift Polish citizens' understandings of what democracy constitutes. Although PiS may still have affected its voters' views of democracy while in government, our analysis shows that political culture is not solely determined by the discourse and actions of political parties and can, therefore, be treated as an independent factor shaping vote choice.

The various robustness checks indicate the validity of our measurement of citizens' understandings of democracy. On this basis, we proceed to examine to what extent these distinct democratic attitudes are related to support for non-liberal candidates.

Empirical Strategy

To assess how divergent understandings of democracy affect vote choice, we implement OLS models regressing individuals' IMCEs for democratic attributes ($\hat{\pi}_{il}$) on a vector of their understanding of democracy ($\mathbf{X}'_i$), controlling for a vector of partisanship and sociodemographic variables ($\mathbf{Z}'_i$):

$$\hat{\pi}_{il} = \alpha_i + \mathbf{X}'_i\beta_1 + \mathbf{Z}'_i\beta_2 + \varepsilon_i. \qquad (2)$$

This approach allows us to evaluate the relevance of divergent democratic attitudes while controlling for party preference and socio-demographic variables. Controlling for respondents' preferred party allows us to rule out that different partisan attachments confound the relationship between understandings of democracy and revealed democratic attitudes. Similarly, adding socio-demographic variables (age, gender, education, income, perceived economic status) helps mitigate concerns over omitted variables bias, as socioeconomic status could also feed into respondents' level of democratic commitment as measured in the candidate experiment.
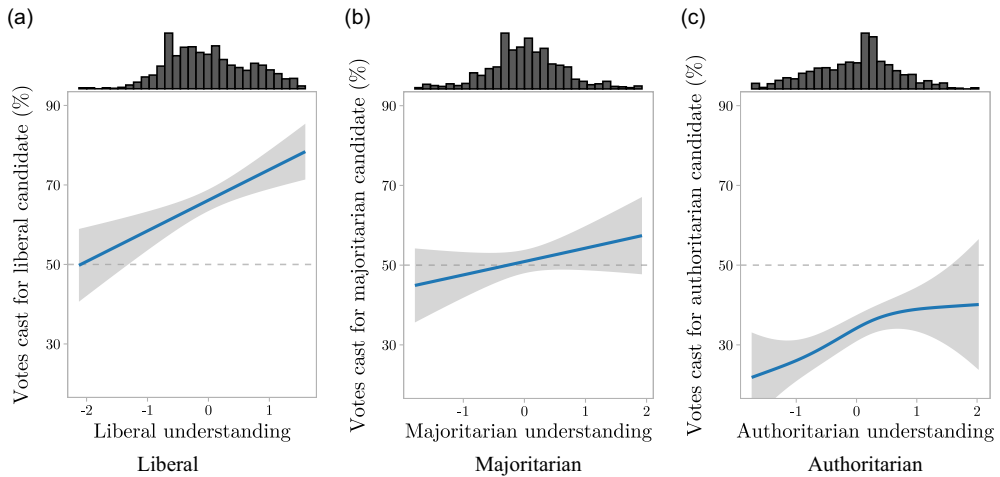
Figure 1. The fraction of vote choices for a consistent over a non-consistent candidate at varying levels of respondents' understandings of democracy. Generalized additive model (GAM) slopes are shown. Ribbon represents a 95 per cent confidence interval.

Empirical Results

Our empirical analysis tests our argument, according to which divergent understandings of democracy feed into political choice. First, we draw on descriptive patterns of vote choice to explore the aggregate relationship between understandings of democracy and candidate preferences. We then examine to what extent divergent democratic attitudes at the individual level help to explain citizens' evaluations of competing candidates at the ballot box. In a final test of our argument, we investigate to what extent partisan voters' willingness to shift from a non-liberal co-partisan candidate to a liberal out-party candidate is associated with divergent understandings of democracy.

The Aggregate Relationship between Understandings of Democracy and Candidate Preferences

Our main argument holds that divergent understandings of democracy feed into citizens' political choices in contexts of democratic backsliding. To provide an aggregate overview of the relationship between divergent understandings of democracy and choices between candidates who advance different democratic views for the entire survey electorate, we examine a subset of vote choices that pit a candidate whose democratic positions are consistent across both democratic attributes against a candidate expressing mixed views.

We first focus on choices in which respondents are confronted with one candidate with consistent liberal attributes and another candidate holding either consistent majoritarian or authoritarian views. Figure 1(a) shows the fraction of choices made for the purely liberal candidate and plots the share along with respondents' extent of liberal understanding of democracy. The more respondents' liberal orientation increases, the more they prefer the liberal candidate to their non-liberal contender. Substantially, from the least liberal to the most liberal respondents in the sample, we find an average increase of about 25 per cent in electoral support for liberal candidates over non-liberal candidates.

We find a similar but weaker pattern for choice situations where a fully authoritarian candidate runs against either a fully liberal or majoritarian candidate (Figure 1(c)): the more respondents subscribe to an authoritarian understanding, the higher the vote share for consistent authoritarian candidates, with an overall increase in electoral support of 10 per cent. However, note that the overall vote share for purely authoritarian candidates does not exceed 40 per cent, even among

Table 4. OLS regression of candidate attribute preferences (IMCEs) on liberal, majoritarian, and authoritarian understandings of democracy, controlling for party preference and socioeconomic controls. Robust standard errors are reported. The full regression table can be found in Table B.5

	Judges		Media	
	Majoritarian	Authoritarian	Majoritarian	Authoritarian
Liberal understanding	−0.129*	−0.159**	−0.059	−0.178***
	(0.054)	(0.054)	(0.052)	(0.054)
Majoritarian understanding	0.127*	0.092	0.006	0.059
	(0.054)	(0.052)	(0.050)	(0.051)
Authoritarian understanding	−0.007	−0.003	0.021	0.033
	(0.057)	(0.057)	(0.057)	(0.059)
Party preference (baseline = PiS)				
Civic Coalition	−0.350***	−0.301***	−0.099	−0.152*
	(0.061)	(0.061)	(0.058)	(0.060)
Poland 2050	−0.213***	−0.144*	−0.122*	−0.205**
	(0.064)	(0.066)	(0.061)	(0.064)
Confederation	−0.166*	−0.127	−0.114	−0.188*
	(0.070)	(0.076)	(0.075)	(0.080)
The Left	−0.270**	−0.180*	−0.147	−0.168
	(0.088)	(0.091)	(0.088)	(0.087)
Don't know/none	−0.172***	−0.154**	−0.034	−0.091
	(0.050)	(0.050)	(0.047)	(0.052)
Socioeconomic controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
R^2	0.059	0.057	0.018	0.044
Adj. R^2	0.050	0.047	0.008	0.034
Num. obs.	1979	1979	1979	1979

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

strongly authoritarian respondents, indicating an overall rejection of candidates expressing authoritarian positions by respondents.

A substantially weaker pattern emerges for a majoritarian understanding of democracy (Figure 1(b)). Only marginally growing with respondents' attitude toward a majoritarian understanding of democracy, the average vote share increases from just below to just above 50 per cent, suggesting that a majoritarian understanding is substantially more weakly associated with preferences for fully majoritarian candidates than liberal and authoritarian understandings with support for congruent political candidates.

Individual-level Understandings of Democracy and Candidate Preferences

The descriptive overview provides insight into the aggregate relationship between divergent understandings and support for political candidates. To investigate the individual-level association between divergent understandings of democracy and the evaluation of candidates expressing distinct positions on liberal democratic safeguards, we turn to the analysis of individual-level candidate evaluations by regressing respondents' IMCEs on their liberal, majoritarian, and authoritarian understandings scores. Table 4 reports our main findings.

The results indicate that the more respondents subscribe to a liberal understanding of democracy, the less supportive they are of candidates who make (1) majoritarian and (2) authoritarian claims about the judiciary and (3) endorse authoritarian-leaning views of government media. In turn, a higher majoritarian understanding is associated with stronger support for candidates delivering majoritarian or authoritarian statements about the appointment of judges. By contrast, a majoritarian understanding does not predict the approval of candidates proposing majoritarian or authoritarian views on the role of public media. Similarly, a higher authoritarian understanding is not positively related to respondents' support for majoritarian or

authoritarian candidates. We add party controls to our models to show that the effect of distinct understandings of democracy holds even when we account for citizens' partisan affiliation and other party-related dynamics that we discuss further below.

Overall, our findings allow us to conclude that divergent democratic attitudes play a discrete and non-negligible role in shaping citizens' vote choice in contexts of democratic backsliding. As shown in Figure 1, there is a consistently positive relationship between a liberal understanding of democracy and voting for liberal candidates. In other words, even a small increase in a liberal understanding of democracy at any range of the scale is associated with substantive vote share increases for liberal candidates. Divergent understandings of democracy within the citizenry appear to enable democratic backsliding primarily due to distinct levels of liberal democratic commitment among citizens, thus providing support for Hypothesis 1a.

By contrast, we find no support for our Hypothesis 1b on the overall congruence between respondents' and candidates' democratic views as a predictor of candidate preference. If this were the case, we should find not only that respondents expressing strongly liberal attitudes are most likely to support candidates with liberal views. In addition, respondents holding more majoritarian or authoritarian views of democracy should similarly endorse candidates expressing corresponding democratic positions, possibly even to the point of rating lower those candidates who espouse liberal democratic views. In other words, this would imply that certain voters support specific candidates, not *despite* the undemocratic practices they sponsor but precisely *because* these candidates profess views that align with their own views. However, our analysis suggests instead that respondents who endorse non-liberal understandings of democracy appear to lend less weight to candidates' democratic views rather than actively supporting candidates who propose democratic transgressions that correspond to their understanding of democracy.

Partisan Voting and Rejecting Non-liberal Candidates

Our findings so far provide evidence that citizens' level of commitment to liberal democracy shapes their willingness to support candidates making majoritarian and authoritarian claims. A large body of literature suggests that partisanship is a main driver of citizens' tolerance towards violations of democratic principles by co-partisan politicians (Ahlquist et al. 2018; Carey et al. 2020; Graham and Svolik 2020). The key mechanism underpinning this argument is that voters are unwilling to switch to an out-party candidate if their own co-partisan behaves undemocratically. To examine to what extent partisans' willingness to shift to an out-party candidate if their co-partisan candidate adopts non-liberal positions is associated with divergent understandings of democracy, we focus on a subset of choices, namely those between a co-partisan who adopts at least one non-liberal (that is, majoritarian or authoritarian) position, and who runs against a purely liberal out-party candidate. We implement the following linear probability regression:

$$Y_{ij} = \alpha_i + \mathbf{X}'_i \beta_1 + \mathbf{Z}'_i \beta_2 + \varepsilon_i, \tag{3}$$

where Y is respondent i's preference for the non-liberal co-partisan in choice j, $\mathbf{X}'_i$ is the vector for the respondent's understanding of democracy scores, and $\mathbf{Z}'_i$ is a vector of socioeconomic controls as defined in Equation 2.

This analysis allows us to test whether partisans' willingness to shift from a non-liberal co-partisan candidate to a liberal out-party candidate is associated with divergent understandings of democracy. Table 5 displays the results. Controlling for partisanship and socioeconomic variables, the more respondents subscribe to a liberal understanding of democracy, the less likely they are to vote for the non-liberal co-partisan candidate over a liberal out-party candidate. We find the reverse effect for an authoritarian understanding of democracy, but the association diminishes when jointly regressing vote preference on all understandings of democracy.

Table 5. Linear probability model (OLS) of voting a non-liberal co-partisan candidate over a liberal out-party candidate on liberal, majoritarian, and authoritarian understandings of democracy, controlling for party preference and socioeconomic controls. Robust standard errors clustered at the respondent level are reported

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Liberal understanding	−0.106**			−0.175**
	(0.035)			(0.060)
Majoritarian understanding		−0.001		0.085
		(0.039)		(0.057)
Authoritarian understanding			0.056	−0.082
			(0.035)	(0.066)
Party preference (baseline = PiS)				
Civic Coalition	−0.110	−0.108	−0.105	−0.093
	(0.061)	(0.062)	(0.062)	(0.062)
Poland 2050	−0.024	−0.014	−0.014	−0.016
	(0.064)	(0.065)	(0.065)	(0.064)
Confederation	−0.152	−0.146	−0.145	−0.142
	(0.079)	(0.080)	(0.079)	(0.079)
The Left	−0.062	−0.072	−0.066	−0.042
	(0.081)	(0.083)	(0.082)	(0.082)
Socioeconomic controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
R^2	0.070	0.052	0.057	0.075
Adj. R^2	0.039	0.019	0.025	0.039
N Choices	516	516	516	516
N Respondents	436	436	436	436

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

A majoritarian understanding of democracy is unrelated to voting for a non-liberal co-partisan over a liberal out-party candidate.

In sum, the results are consistent with our finding that divergent degrees to which respondents embrace a liberal understanding of democracy are associated with the extent to which voters reject non-liberal candidates: when respondents' co-partisan candidate adopts a non-liberal position and runs against a liberal out-party candidate, the extent to which partisan voters abandon the non-liberal co-partisan varies with respondents' liberal understanding of democracy.[12]

Conclusions: The Role of Divergent Understandings of Democracy in Democratic Backsliding

Our study examined an alternative explanation of why citizens, despite overwhelmingly supporting democracy in principle, may fail to use elections to remove political elites holding non-liberal democratic views from power. We argue that failure to punish democratic violations at the ballot box reflects considerable heterogeneity among citizens' understandings of democracy and, notably, a lack of attitudinal consolidation around liberal democratic principles. Our empirical findings lend support to our theoretical argument linking citizens' democratic attitudes to their vote choice. We put forward – and examine empirically – two distinct mechanisms that may account for the impact of divergent democratic attitudes upon vote choice. Our main insight suggests that the relative strength of *liberal democratic commitment* is most crucial to citizens' willingness to counter democratic backsliding at the ballot box. In turn, we find little empirical support for the hypothesis that vote choice depends on a generalized *congruence* between voters' understandings of democracy and the democratic views expressed by candidates. Overall, our findings indicate that, where liberal democratic commitment is weak or unevenly distributed

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[12]In Appendix B.2.4, we examine in more depth how partisanship manifests in preferences for candidates holding different democratic positions.

across the electorate, citizens cannot be expected to consistently play the role of democratic bulwarks against authoritarian-leaning elites.

Our empirical analysis of the Polish case indicates that citizens' understandings of democracy are relevant in explaining their vote choice and evaluations of competing candidates. Although Polish voters, on average, reject candidates who actively endorse a weakening of checks and balances, the picture is more complex at the individual level: parts of the electorate hold only weak liberal attitudes or espouse majoritarian or authoritarian views of democracy and are, therefore, indifferent toward candidates who advocate undermining key features of liberal democracy. This mixed pattern is particularly interesting in light of the recent government turnover following the October 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland. Observers have explained the success of the opposition coalition and the ousting of PiS with reference to the disproportionate mobilization of young, liberal-minded female voters in the wake of a further restriction on abortion rights (McMahon 2023; Deutsche Welle 2023). Besides, opposition leader Donald Tusk had explicitly framed the elections as a contest over liberal democracy itself, a strategy shown to help rally opposition parties and voters alike against an authoritarian-minded incumbent (Gessler and Wunsch 2025). With individual-level understandings of democracy central to vote choice, the recent political developments in Poland appear to confirm that their deliberate mobilization by political actors can play an important role in shaping election outcomes.

Conceptually, our analysis expands upon earlier findings highlighting the threat of majoritarian voters for liberal democracy (Grossman et al. 2022). We propose an overarching argument that theorizes the behavioural consequences of democratic attitudes and how diverse understandings of democracy may shape citizens' perceptions of competing candidates and their vote choice. In doing so, we posit the micro-foundations linking political culture to political behaviour in contexts of democratic backsliding. We contrast liberal democratic attitudes with non-democratic authoritarian conceptions as well as majoritarian views. Our approach explicitly tackles the presence of contestation around the concept of democracy itself, which has been posited as a key oversight in studies of citizens' responses to democratic backsliding so far (Ahmed 2023).

By disaggregating the unidimensional measurement of 'support for democracy', our study makes several contributions to our understanding of democratic backsliding and the place of citizens in such processes. Most fundamentally, our findings question the assumption in much of the existing research that people have a common understanding of democracy and – especially in polarized contexts – sacrifice democratic performance primarily due to partisan considerations. Instead, we show that there is no close overlap between distinct democratic attitudes and party preference and that the willingness to punish undemocratic co-partisans relates closely to respondents' commitment to liberal democracy.

To probe how far this insight on heterogeneous democratic attitudes and their behavioural consequences travels, we suggest that future survey-based research may consider adding a battery on understandings of democracy to provide a more fine-grained insight into mass support for democracy across a range of empirical contexts. A priori, a weak commitment to liberal democracy may be considered a specific characteristic of post-communist political systems (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017, 309–310) and related to their comparatively short experience with democracy. At the same time, given the rise of increasingly open illiberal appeals by political leaders from the USA to Hungary to Brazil, we are reasonably confident that our findings on heterogeneous understandings of democracy as a key vulnerability of political systems to democratic backsliding could be replicated in other contexts.[13]

Our empirical investigation of divergent democratic attitudes and their impact on contexts of democratic backsliding helps reconcile earlier findings of high nominal support for democracy with electoral victories of illiberal parties or candidates. Using a more differentiated measure of support for democracy that integrates alternative understandings besides a liberal one, our

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[13]See also the replication of our analysis on a survey sample from Hungary in Online Appendix F.

analysis indicates that where attitudinal consolidation around liberal democracy remains insufficiently developed, voters cannot reliably act as safeguards against democratic backsliding. Instead, they remain vulnerable to majoritarian and authoritarian appeals by elites. These findings hold important theoretical and practical implications and open multiple new research avenues.

In theoretical terms, our analysis raises the question of the potential causes of heterogeneous understandings of democracy in the population and their evolution over time. Political culture research tends to assume that mass attitudes towards democracy are stable or subject to gradual change at best. At the same time, the onset and persistence of democratic backsliding in erstwhile reasonably consolidated democratic contexts casts doubt on this assumption. Future research may scrutinize whether changes in a country's democratic institutional environment and citizens' responses to such shifts are related to individual-level changes in understandings of democracy. These shifts, in turn, may be explained by changing elite cues or transforming compositions of the electorate, whereby previous segments of non-voters are newly mobilized by political actors who explicitly appeal to their specific understandings of democracy to shore up electoral support. Besides survey-based research, qualitative approaches and in particular focus groups may provide further insight into the variety of understandings of democracy in a given population and how these shape political behaviour at the individual level.

In practical terms, our findings suggest that where non-liberal elites coincide with an electorate whose commitment to liberal democracy is not firmly anchored, they may successfully activate latent or open non-liberal understandings of democracy, upon which they can draw to legitimize their gradual dismantling of democratic standards. Our analysis sheds new light onto the potential remedies to strengthen citizens' readiness to serve as bulwarks for democracy: in addition to a mass of ideologically centrist voters willing to abandon incumbents acting undemocratically (Svolik 2020, 27), we contend that what is needed to counter democratic backsliding is a firm commitment not simply to democracy in its broadest sense but to the specific principles of separation of powers and civil liberties that underpin liberal democracy. Such firm liberal democratic commitment may be pursued via more extensive and deliberate investment into civic education of citizens, especially in more recent democracies, but, in light of the recent fragilization of democracies across the globe, also in contexts in which democratic values so far had seem to be firmly anchored.

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