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Challenges to Democracy
Session 8: Democratic Norms and Affective Polarization

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Plan for today's session

- we've now learned how to define democracy and how they can be endangered by the elite
- **today:** how can norms on the citizen-level help us explain instances of backsliding
- + feedback on the seminar

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Examples of social norms

Figure: Throwing trash out the car window...

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Examples of social norms

Figure: Queuing in the supermarket...

What social norms are...

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

What social norms are...

"We are social animals embedded in thick networks of relations, and what we do has consequences, for us and for others. Interdependence, not independence, rules social life." (Bicchieri 2017, p. 10)

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

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What social norms are...

- they are **conditional** as they are interdependent; and they are social since they depend on others in my social network (Bicchieri 2017)

- norm compliance hinges on potential punishment *and* individual support for the norm

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Norms vs. attitudes

Norms are **different from attitudes and customs** (Bicchieri 2017)

- attitudes are personal normative preferences about things or behaviors
- norms can occasionally align but are not based on individual preferences

Why does the distinction matter?

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Political norms

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

Why are political norms so consequential?

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Democracy in America

All over the room, you find sheets with the article classification
scheme we used before. For each of the sheets, you've got one
minute to fill it out on your own. At your final stop, you have to
choose what's the best answer to the question.

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Democracy in America

- **Research Question**:
- **Main Argument**:
- **Data and Analysis**:
- **Results**:
- **Implications**:

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Democracy in America

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

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Theoretical Argument

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

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

- the more **extreme** and **intense** (α) voters' policy attitudes, the more they forgo democratic principles

- polarization inhibits democratic norms both at the citizen and elite level

- cross-cutting issues would help as they undermine strong preference of a voter for undemocratic candidates

Research design

They test their expectations using two original experiments.

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

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

**How do they know how much weight voters put on policies (α)?**

Research design

They follow a two-staged panel design:

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

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What do they find?

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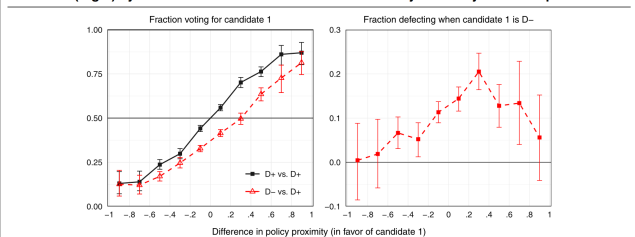
What are their main results?

What do they find?

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

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

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What do they find?

Some additional findings:

- candidate polarization increases the problem, as candidates with more extreme positions are less punished

- variation in norm sanctioning by democratic principle (more likely to punish violations against free press and impartiality of courts; less for gerrymandering) [**why?**]

- violations against social norms are punished to a larger extent

Study 2

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

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

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Study 2

Based on their prior study, they expect the punishment of anti-democratic behaviour to be weakest in partisan strongholds of Gianforte.
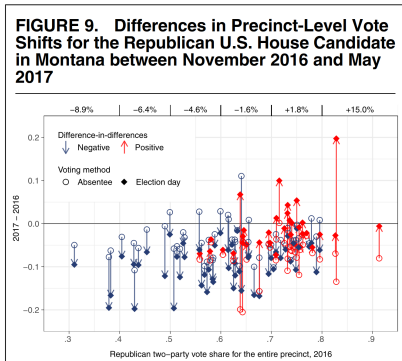
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Study 2

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

Anything surprising?

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Any remaining questions?

Question by **Greta**: "...in the weeks and months before the elections usually all kinds of scandals appear about the candidates, so neither of them seem to act 100% democratically. So why would voters change their minds when there is no such thing as a perfect candidate?"

Any remaining questions?

Question by **Max:** The experiments focus on democracy in the US, specifically on a two-party system. Could there be other implications of the findings for multi-party systems?

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Any remaining questions?

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

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Does Affective Polarization Undermine Democratic Norms or Accountability? Maybe Not

How does the article by Broockman et al. (2023) relate to Graham and Svolik (2020). Where does it depart?

Similarities	Differences

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Does Affective Polarization Undermine Democratic Norms or Accountability? Maybe Not

Similarities	Differences
• Relationship between polarization and political choices • People face trade-offs when making choices • Policy priorities are key to explain citizens' choices	• Polarization is not the most likely determinant of political choices • One examines affective polarization, the other one policy polarization

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What affective polarization is and why it (does not) matter(s)

They define **affective polarization** as "the difference in affect one has for one's own party minus the outparty" (Broockman et al. 2023, p. 809). It could matter because...

- we tend to follow our preferences

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What affective polarization is and why it (does not) matter(s)

But it could also be less important since...

- when making political choices, we use heuristics which are easily available [and these may very well be related to other information]

- the more affective polarization drives citizens' choices, the more they have to discount other factors (like their policy priorities)

$\rightarrow$ there is an omitted variable problem! It's possible that affective polarization only correlates with

Research Design

- five different survey experiments (more than 12,000 respondents) between 2019 and 2020; all in the US
- **first manipulation**: partisan version of the trust game in which respondents are given/not given money back by a fictional out-partisan
- **second manipulation**: politicians' policy congruence (by roll-call behaviour)
- aim for high realism (adjusting treatment to respondents' local experience of party competition)
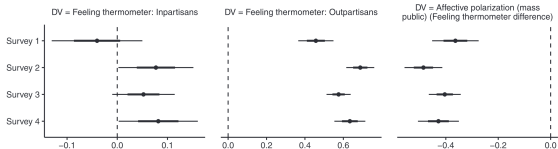- alternative measurements in study 5 [does not change any conclusions]

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Results

Figure: Manipulation check (Broockman et al. 2023, p. 813)

The treatment works: trust game affects affective polarization

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Results

FIGURE 3 Effect of Reducing Affective Polarization on Social Distance Items (Survey 4)
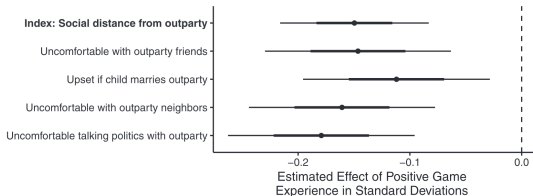

Figure: Effects on interpersonal relations (Broockman et al. 2023, p. 815)

Trust game also (positively) affects cooperation on an inter-personal level.

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FIGURE 5 Does Reducing Affective Polarization Reduce Voters'
Sensitivity to Information about their Member of
Congress?

(a) Survey 1: Effect of Showing Incongruent (vs. Congruent) Votes
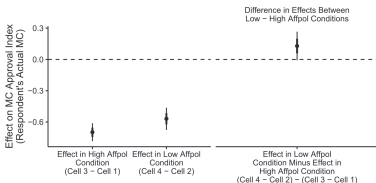
Affective polarization does not make other information
(policy-related) less relevant [in this case, even slightly more
relevant]. In addition, it does not let citizens follow party cues
blindly, reject bipartisan behaviour or perceive empirical conditions
differently.

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FIGURE 8 Effect of Reducing Affective Polarization on Support for Democratic Norms

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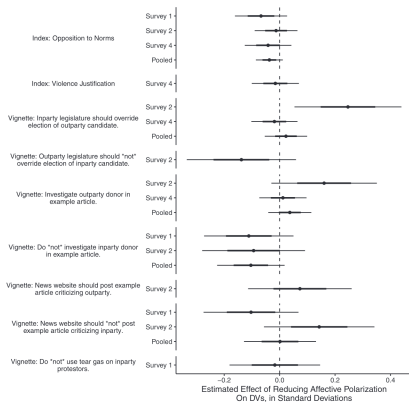
And now?

Does polarization matter? Or not?

Future studies needed, particularly along the lines of two
questions/comments by **Max**

- "The authors themselves note that they can only measure the
  immediate effects"

- "the authors do not distinguish between dimensions of
  affective polarization: effects were measured when dealing
  with 'normal people'. But not in other dimensions/levels
  (politicians, bipartisanship)."

Conclusion

What we have learned from today...

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

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Feedback on the seminar

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To prepare for next week...

- next week, already our final session on potential causes for democratic backsliding: global crises
- **readings:**
  - Mittiga, R. (2022). Political Legitimacy, Authoritarianism, and Climate Change. *American Political Science Review, 116*(3), 998–1011. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001301
  - Cerkez, N. (2024). *Extreme Weather Events and the Support for Democracy*. https://nicolascerkez.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/droughtsdemocracy-2.pdf

Any further questions?

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Alvarez-Benjumea, A., & Valentim, V. (2024). The Enforcement of
  Political Norms. *British Journal of Political Science*, 1–24.
  https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123423000716
Axelrod, R. (1986). An evolutionary approach to norms. *American
  political science review*, *80*(4), 1095–1111.
Bicchieri, C. (2017). Diagnosing Norms. In C. Bicchieri (Ed.),
  *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and
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  https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:
  oso/9780190622046.003.0001

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