

# **Questionnaire Democrats? Reconsidering the Relevance of Abstract Democracy Support in the American Public**

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## **Abstract**

The American public largely favors “democracy,” yet many citizens tolerate undemocratic actions and candidates. This raises doubts about the relevance of abstract democracy support to actual democratic commitment. In contrast, we argue that abstract democracy support is a normatively significant dimension of attitude variation among Americans. Using nineteen surveys fielded between 1995 and 2024, we show that a sizable segment of the public expresses only tepid support for democracy, and that a nontrivial minority expresses opposition. Moreover, commonly used abstract democracy support items converge on a single latent construct which displays high rank-order stability, but also meaningful within-person variation, over a two-year period. Abstract democracy support negatively predicts openness to a wide range of electoral and liberal democratic violations and is associated with greater likelihood of electorally punishing anti-democratic candidates. In panel data, positive within-person deviations in abstract democracy support precede negative within-person deviations in openness to authoritarian governance, suggesting that individual-level shifts in abstract support predict later change in substantive democracy attitudes. Overall our findings suggest that the value of ‘democracy’ is contested among Americans, with potential implications for democratic erosion. We recommend that efforts to understand the American public’s role in democratic backsliding and restoration treat abstract support as a distinct attitude construct, measure it with multi-item scales, and explore whether or not it possesses causal significance.

The American public's commitment to democracy has become a question of increasing theoretical and practical importance. The ability to provide useful insight into this matter depends on both identification of relevant democracy attitude constructs and valid measurement of these. The most common measurement approach in cross-national surveys involves directing respondents to rate their evaluation of "democracy" on a favorable vs. unfavorable continuum. But there are reasons to question the usefulness of this approach. Most citizens around the world express support for democracy in the abstract, but many of these citizens still display an openness to anti-democratic actions and candidates (Chapman, Hanson, Dzutsati, & DeBell, 2023; Inglehart, 2003; Kirsch & Welzel, 2019; Svolik, 2019). And there is additional reason for skepticism about the relevance of abstract democracy support within the United States, where the idea of democracy has been central to national identity (Achen & Bartels, 2017, Chapter 1; Stimson, 2004). Indeed there are strong grounds to doubt that the value of "democracy" is meaningfully contested in the United States or closely related to actual democratic commitment (e.g., Graham & Svolik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2023).

In this article, we report a systematic investigation of the importance of variation in abstract democracy support among American citizens. We do so through both re-evaluation of published evidence and original analyses of 19 national surveys fielded between 1995 and 2024. We find the following:

- (a) Although most Americans express support for democracy, a substantial share (25-45%) report only tepid support by selecting a moderately supportive response option, and roughly one-tenth report opposition. Thus abstract support questions have the potential to capture variation in level of democratic commitment despite the heavy concentration of high responders.

- (b) The commonly used questions gauging abstract democracy support converge on an underlying unidimensional construct which, after correcting for measurement error, has high rank order stability across a two-year interval ( $r > .8$ ).
- (c) Abstract democracy support negatively predicts support for or tolerance of a wide range of anti-democratic actions, including actions that violate electoral and liberal features of democracy. These relationships are largely driven by the frequently overlooked distinction between tepid and committed supporters. Meanwhile, evidence from panel data shows that individual-level increases in abstract democracy support tend to precede decreases in openness to anti-democratic actions.
- (d) Abstract democracy support predicts relative inclination to electorally punish anti-democratic candidates within both a conjoint experiment and, net of party identity and ideology, within observational data from the 2016, 2020, and 2024 Presidential elections.
- (e) Partisan and demographic group differences in abstract democracy support track such group differences in openness to authoritarian actions, suggesting validity of between-group differences in abstract support.

Overall our evidence paints a picture of abstract democracy support as a coherent general attitude among Americans that reflects and predicts degree of resistance vs. amenability to democracy-degrading actions and candidates. We recommend that research address the role of Americans' orientation toward the term "democracy" – among other social and psychological factors – in the public's facilitation of democratic erosion and potential to promote democratic restoration. We furthermore recommend use of multi-item composites rather than single items to assess abstract support.

### **Abstract Democracy Support Questions**

Researchers have taken a variety of approaches to measuring democratic commitment (e.g., Ahmed, 2023, Claassen et al., 2025; Konig, Siewert, & Ackermann, 2022). In many cases these measures gauge support vs. opposition to specific anti-democratic actions or forms of government (e.g., Broockman, Kalla, & Westwood, 2023; Drutman, Goldman, & Diamond, 2020; Zechmeister, 2018). But the most common class of democracy attitude question simply directs respondents to rate their evaluations of ‘democracy’ on a favorable vs. unfavorable continuum. These questions do not define democracy for the respondent and do not direct respondents to consider particular types of democratic violations. The four most commonly used items in this class are displayed in Table 1. We refer to them as democratic system favorability, democratic importance, the “Churchill” question, and democratic preference.

Table 1. Commonly Used Abstract Democracy Support Questions

| Item                           | Question Wording                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Democratic System Favorability | Various types of political systems are described below. Please think about each choice in terms of governing this country and indicate if you think that it would be a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing the United States . . . Having a democratic political system.                                    |
| Democratic Importance          | How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? On this scale where 1 means it is “not at all important” and 10 means “absolutely important” what position would you choose?                                                                                                                          |
| Churchill Question             | Here is a statement. Please tell us your opinion using a scale from 1, which means “strongly disagree” to 7, which means “strongly agree”. You can use any number between 1 and 7 . . . Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?   |
| Democratic Preference          | Please read the following statements and tell us which is closest to your view, even if none of them are exactly right. -- Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government. OR In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable. OR For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have. |

Sources: World Values Survey, Latin American Public Opinion Project AmericasBarometer, and Democracy Fund VOTER Survey

### **The Case Against Abstract Democracy Support**

Data from abstract democracy support questions – either considered alone or as part of a composite – are frequently used to make inferences about public support for democracy in

comparative and American politics (e.g., Claassen, & Magalhães, 2023; Foa and Mounk, 2016; Lagos, 2003; Torcal & Magalhães, 2022). But the value of these items is questionable (see Supplementary Material (SM) Part 1 for illustrative quotes). To start, an extensive literature in comparative politics has examined cross-national and between-person variation in the structure and content of meanings ascribed to the term “democracy” (Canache, 2012; Chapman et al., 2023; Chu, Williamson, & Yeung, 2024; Dalton et al., 2007; Lagos, 2003; Osterberg-Kaufmann, Stark, & Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2020; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007). Some of this work suggests that in non-democratic countries core liberal features of democracy are often rejected and explicitly authoritarian notions of democracy are often endorsed among putative democracy supporters (Kirsch & Welzel, 2019; Rose, Mishler, & Haerpfer, 1998; Ulbricht, 2018).

But even in a consolidated liberal democracy like the US, there is a solid basis for questioning the utility of abstract support questions. Most American citizens profess support for ‘democracy’, but many of these citizens still support or tolerate anti-democratic actions and candidates (Malka, Federico, Costello, & Panish, 2025; Graham & Svolik, 2020). Thus the distinction between giving lip service to democracy – or being a ‘questionnaire democrat’ (Dalton, Shin, and Jou 2007) – and actually maintaining democratic commitments might matter a great deal in the US.

Indeed, survey research provides several explanations for such a disjunction. Professions of democracy support might emerge from misinterpretations of democracy as government that delivers favorable outcomes and is generally felt to be good, rather than commitment to actual democratic procedures, rights, and institutions (Bratton, 2010; Chapman et al., 2023). In fact, American citizens are sometimes motivated to rationalize their interpretation of democracy’s meaning to confer credibility upon their side’s problematic actions or to discredit the legitimate

actions of their opponents (Krishnarajan, 2023). In this vein, American partisans may sometimes support democracy-degrading actions with the aim of preserving democracy in the face of perceived out-party threats (Braley et al., 2023), raising concern that abstract support can reflect a willingness to degrade democracy in a misguided effort to save it .

Beyond this, citizens might vary in which aspects of democracy they prioritize, raising the possibility that democracy support questions do not measure the same construct across citizens (e.g., Ahmed, 2023; Canache, 2012; König et al., 2022; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007). For example, Americans might vary in the extent to which they define democracy in terms of strictly majoritarian or liberal attributes (Grossman, Kronick, Levendusky, & Meredith, 2022).

Finally, even to the extent that support for “democracy” is based on a reasonably accurate and consistent understanding, abstract support items might fail to capture willingness to trade-off democracy for preferred partisan and policy outcomes (Gidengil et al., 2022; Graham & Svolik, 2020). This may be especially true in a polarized political environment where a great deal is at stake policy-wise in elections (McCoy & Somer, 2019; Svolik, 2019).

### **Reconsidering the Relevance of Abstract Democracy Support in the U.S.**

Notwithstanding these considerations, abstract democracy support questions might still reflect a normatively significant dimension of attitude variation among American citizens. First consider the overarching concern that citizens almost always profess support for democracy despite frequently revealing a lack of commitment to democratic principles. This is often treated as *prima facie* evidence that abstract support items lack validity. However, researchers regularly collapse across response options on the supportive side of the continuum when making this case (e.g., Drutman et al., 2020; Graham & Svolik, 2020; Inglehart, 2003). It is possible that many Americans feel ‘tepid’ support and express this by selecting a democracy-supportive option short

of maximum support (see Hall, Leigh, & Solomon, 2026). If that is the case, variability on the democracy-supportive side of the continuum might be meaningful.

Next consider the concerns raised about tendencies to mis-define democracy in terms of preferred policy outcomes (e.g., Chapman et al., 2023) or to coopt the meaning of the term democracy for partisan purposes (Krishnarajan, 2023). These are valid concerns, but it is important to consider them in light of the tendency for citizens of wealthy democratic countries like the United States to define democracy in a reasonably accurate way, in terms of electoral fairness, civil liberties, and political rights (Canache, 2012; Chapman et al., 2023; Choi & Woo, 2024; Chu, Williamson, & Yeung, 2024; Dalton et al., 2007; Graham & Svulik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2023; Ulbricht, 2018). Moreover, findings consistently show that those citizens who are *highest* in abstract democracy support are the most *accurate* in defining democracy in both electoral and liberal terms (Chapman et al., 2023; Mattes & Bratton, 2007; Miller, Hesli, Reisinger, 1997). Recurring evidence that “to know democracy is to love it” (Cho, 2014, p. 478) suggests that mis-definitions of democracy might not reduce the validity of abstract democracy support questions. Middling or low abstract support might in part reflect a willingness to corrupt one’s definition of democracy to justify anti-democratic action. In this sense, readiness to debase democracy’s meaning may be baked into abstract support measures.<sup>1</sup>

Next, consider that democracy is a multi-dimensional concept, and that citizens might vary in which aspects of democracy (e.g., majoritarian, protection of political rights) they

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<sup>1</sup> A related but distinct concern is that social desirability bias can lead citizens who are unfavorable toward democracy to falsely claim support (Adserà, Arenas, & Boix, 2023; Carlin, 2018). However, list experiments and other techniques suggest that citizens do not feel social pressure to misreport their opposition to democracy (Kaftan, 2024; . Magalhães & Aarslew, 2025). And, as we will show, many Americans are not at all reluctant to reveal less than maximum democratic commitment.

prioritize or even recognize as democratic (e.g., Grossman et al., 2022; König et al., 2022). But even if anti-democratic attitudes in one domain do not always go with anti-democratic attitudes in another domain, it remains possible that abstract democracy support summarizes a general orientation reflecting reactions to a wide range of these violations. Furthermore, the statistical independence of distinct democracy attitude dimensions should not be taken for granted. In fact, recent evidence suggests that attitudes toward different aspects of democracy reflect a single underlying factor among Americans (Claassen et al., 2025).

Finally, consider the argument that many putatively democracy supportive citizens reveal a willingness to support an undemocratic candidate who is aligned with them on policy (Gidengil et al. 2022; Graham & Svolik, 2020). That polarization can outweigh pro-democratic sentiment is very likely to set a limit on the relevance of abstract democracy support (Svolik, 2019). But even if citizens on average prioritize political compatibility over democracy preservation in their vote choices, variability in the extent to which citizens electorally punish anti-democratic candidates still exists (Claassen, 2026; Wunsch, Jacob, & Derksen, 2025). And variation in abstract democracy support might in part account for this.

### **A Conceptualization of Abstract Democracy Support**

In this research we evaluate the possibility that abstract democracy support questions reflect a normatively significant dimension of attitude variation among American citizens. This may be understood as an examination of the construct validity of abstract democracy support measures. In unified perspectives on validity such as Cronbach and Meehl (1955), Messick (1987), and Adcock & Collier (2001)<sup>2</sup>, construct validity refers to how closely scores on a

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<sup>2</sup> Adcock and Collier (2001) use the term ‘measurement validity’ due to inconsistencies in prior usage of the term ‘construct validity’. However, their definition and the sources of validity

measure capture variation on an underlying theoretical construct. Thus the process of evaluating whether a measure is valid depends on a conceptual definition of the underlying construct that clearly implies how this measure should ‘behave’ empirically. Here we propose such a conceptualization and use it as a basis for evaluating validity.

We conceptualize abstract democracy support as variation in positivity vs. negativity applied to the term ‘democracy’ and theorize that it summarizes a general inclination to oppose vs. tolerate a range of anti-democratic actions and candidates. Though democracy itself is a contested concept, there is a fair amount of scholarly agreement about the nature of its procedural core (Dahl, 1971; Schumpeter, 1942/1976). Democratic systems involve a government that is under the control of elected officials who have won free and fair elections. Losers of elections accept their losses and power is transferred without violence and disorder. Rights to vote and to run for office are widely inclusive. Widely guaranteed freedoms of expression, association, and information ensure a competitive and free environment for contestation. In addition, liberal democracy includes institutional constraints on the power of elected officials and an independent judiciary that applies the law impartially across citizens and officeholders (Diamond, 2008). We regard abstract support as an attitude that summarizes tendencies to react to violations of these electoral and liberal features of democracy.

Like most general attitudes, we expect abstract democracy support to in part reflect temporally stable individual differences and to in part reflect short-term fluctuations around individuals’ typical levels (Allport, 1935; Schwarz, 2007). The latter might be due to changes over time in the relative accessibility of pro- and anti-democratic considerations for the

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evidence that they delineate are similar to those found in the classic unified construct validity perspectives.

individual (Zaller & Feldman, 1992), shifts in how partisan political priorities are perceived to cohere or conflict with the aim of upholding democracy (Cohen, Smith, Moseley, & Layton, 2023), or mundane fluctuations in the citizen's psychological state. The stable part is theorized to represent a durable pro- vs. anti-democratic leaning.

In most cases Americans will have positive feelings about democracy, but for some segment of the population these positive feelings will be tempered by anti-democratic considerations. The latter might be rooted in impatience with democratic processes, dissatisfaction with how democracy is working, or negative connotations of 'democracy' related to partisan political messaging. Thus we expect most of the variability to occur on the democracy-supportive side of the continuum.

Finally, we propose that as a summary of democratic inclinations, abstract support predicts reactions to democratic violations. This would not be to deny that partisan implications matter more than abstract democratic commitment when evaluating a democratic violation or making a vote choice. Rather, this could mean that when doing so, citizens not only draw on their perceptions of political implications but also call to mind their feelings about the idea of democracy. In other words, abstract democracy support may matter at the margins for political decisions that have implications for the quality of democracy.

### **The Present Research**

We report a systematic test of the construct validity of abstract democracy support items within the American public using survey data from American national samples fielded between 1995 and 2024. For expository purposes we introduce each aspect of construct validity immediately prior to reporting the hypotheses and evidence associated therewith.

## Method

We draw on data from 19 surveys of American national samples fielded between 1995 and 2024. The data sources are the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group (2021) panel (VOTER; 3 surveys: 2017-2019), the World Values Survey (WVS; five surveys: 1995-2017; Inglehart et al., 2020), the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP; 8 surveys: 2006-2021; The AmericasBarometer by the LAPOP Lab, n.d.), the American National Election Studies Time Series (ANES; one survey: 2024), and Lucid Surveys commissioned by the research team (Lucid; 2 surveys: 2020-2023). Information about the surveys is provided in SM Part 2 and question wording is provided in SM Part 3. These particular surveys were selected because they (a) are demographically representative of the American adult population, (b) include at least one abstract democracy support item (and in most cases include two or three), and (c) include other measures that are useful for evaluating the validity of these items. In addition to using these surveys, we re-analyze data from Graham and Svolik's (2020) conjoint experiment using a more reliable abstract democracy support composite formed from items in their dataset.

### Measures.

Each survey included at least one of the four indicators of abstract democracy support with all but four containing two or three of these items (see SM Table S-3). All of these indicators besides the democracy preference item in LAPOP and VOTER allow for expression of tepid support. Questions also varied in terms of whether they included a neutral midpoint option (see SM Part 3). Descriptive statistics for composite measures, computed as simple averages of all available items, are displayed in SM Table S-4.

As described below, the main criterion variables we use to evaluate the validity of abstract support measures are indicators of support for anti-democratic forms of government and

action. Because democracy is a multi-dimensional construct, attitudes toward it take many different forms. In each survey we gathered items whose content taps support vs. opposition to a range of institutions, procedures, rights, and norms that are directly relevant to democratic vs. authoritarian governance. These violations not only vary in the extent to which they are extreme and flagrant vs. subtle and incremental, but also in terms of the specific electoral or liberal democratic features that they degrade. As a whole, they cover features of the procedural core of democracy as reflected in Dahl's (1971) concept of polyarchy as well as liberal democratic features having to do with constraints on how power may be used (Claassen et al., 2025). In each survey we formed both a domain-general measure of support vs. opposition for undemocratic governance by averaging across all available items (Claassen et al., 2025; Claassen & Magalhães, 2023; see SM Table S-5 for descriptive statistics) and domain-specific democracy attitude subscales.

The items varied not only in terms of content but also in terms of the type of response continuum they employed (e.g., 7-point agree-disagree scales, 4-point "Very good" to "Very bad" scales, dichotomous yes-no scales). This complicates empirical approaches to subscale formation because of the likely emergence of method factors. We therefore opted for a conceptual approach to grouping items into domain-specific subscales. Most items fell into one of the following four categories (described in more detail in the Results): elections determining power; institutional constraints on executive power; freedom of expression, association, and press; and direct citizen anti-democratic action (see SM Part 3).

## **Results**

### **Content validity**

Content validity refers to the measure's content adequately sampling the substantive content of the theoretical construct. A glance at the commonly administered abstract support items in Table 1 reveals that, while they differ in their specifics, each presents respondents with the term "democracy" and directs them to make a rating on an evaluative continuum. Given that abstract democracy support is theorized to manifest psychologically as positivity vs. negativity applied to the term democracy, we consider content coverage to be a simple matter that is satisfied with one or more of the items. But because each item will contain variation due to random error, it is useful to aggregate across multiple items.

### **Distributional Validity**

In line with unified approaches to construct validity (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955; Messick, 1987), we examine whether the observed distribution of item responses is consistent with theoretical expectations. Following Saber & Saver (2020) we refer to this as distributional validity.<sup>3</sup> Concerns about democracy support questions often stem from the observation that most citizens express support for democracy despite indications that many of them are willing to compromise democratic principles. We contend that not all 'democracy' support is equal, and that gradations among those on the supportive side of the continuum are well captured by abstract support items. Indeed, as displayed in Figure 1, we find that substantial numbers of democracy-supportive Americans indicate tepid support in response to abstract support items.<sup>4</sup>

We first consider the questions where no neutral option is offered but it is possible to express tepid support (the democratic system, democratic importance, and Churchill questions in

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<sup>3</sup> In other frameworks, (e.g., Messick, 1987) this is considered an aspect of structural validity.

<sup>4</sup> Maximum support is defined as selection of the single highest response option, tepid support as any other response on the positive side of the continuum, and opposition as any negative-side option.

the VOTER and WVS surveys). Here the percentages expressing maximum support for democracy range from 39 to 58, with a median of 52. Thus, many American citizens express less than maximum commitment to democracy. Among them, far more express tepid support (32-46%; median = 36) than opposition (7-18%; median=13).

Next we consider questions where both neutral and tepidly supportive options are available (the Churchill item in the LAPOP surveys, the democratic preference item in the ANES survey, and all three items administered in the Lucid 2020 and 2023 surveys). Here we see that the neutral option is selected a median of 18 percent of the time, and, excluding one outlier (the small N LAPOP 2006 survey), it is selected between 12 to 24 percent of the time. Under these circumstances the median percentage selecting maximum support drops to 40, but the median percentage selecting tepid support (33) and opposition (10) remain about the same.

Finally, we consider the classic democratic preference question in which neutrality, but not tepid support, may be expressed (administered in the VOTER and LAPOP 2006-2014 surveys). Here the percentage expressing maximum commitment is much higher, ranging from 74 to 82 with a median of 78.5, with the remainder divided between opposition and neutrality.

The upshot is that when gradations of support may be expressed, around half of Americans do not express maximum support for democracy on a given item, with the vast majority of these (usually over a third of Americans) expressing tepid support and a non-trivial minority (often around 10%) expressing opposition.

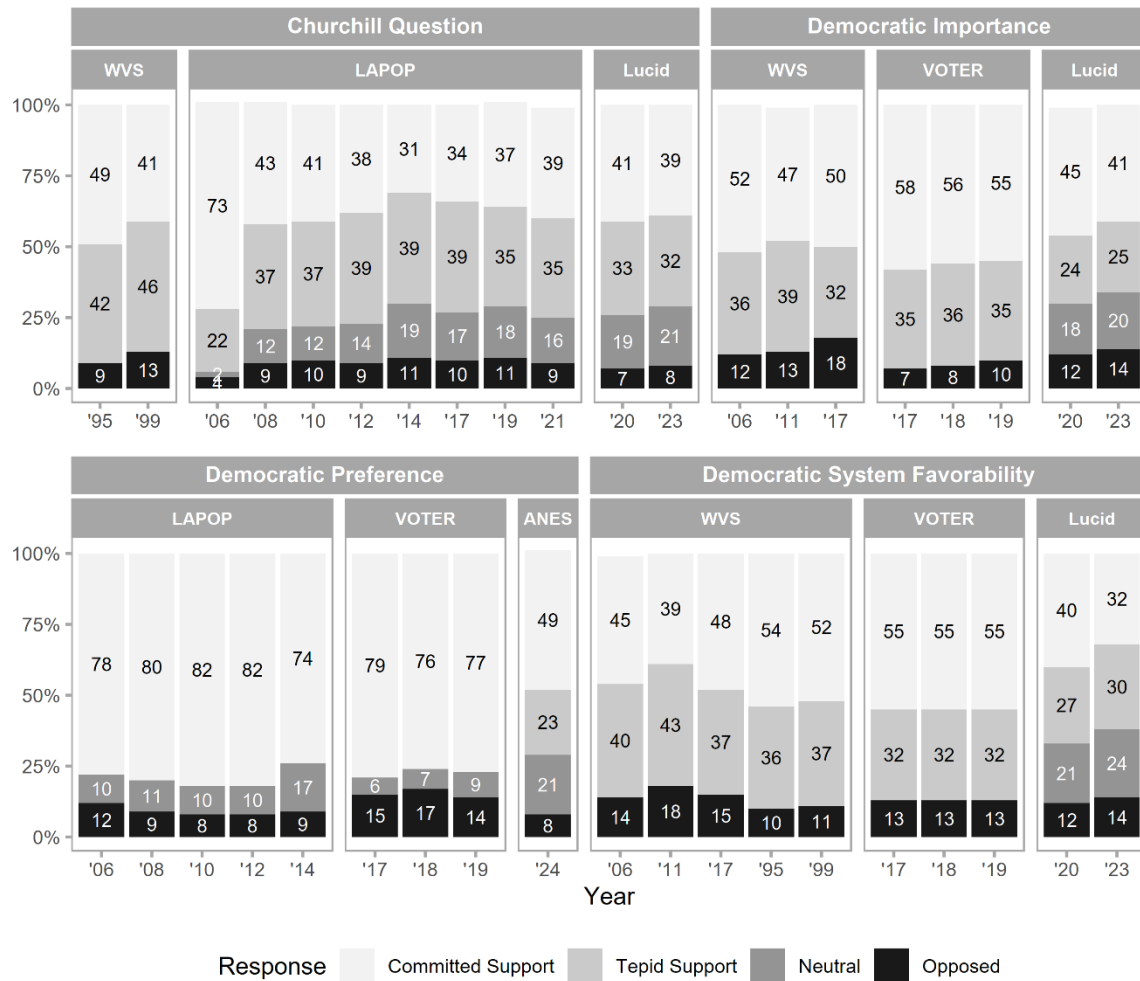


Figure 1. Distributions of Abstract Democracy Support Item Responses in the American Public

### Convergent Validity.

Having established that sizable minorities of Americans express tepid support in response to individual democracy support items, we turn our attention to the dimensional structure of these items. Convergent validity refers to whether distinct indicators of the construct are highly inter-correlated. In some frameworks (e.g., Messick 1987), this type of evidence falls under the rubric of ‘structural validity’, which largely pertains the factor structure of indicators. We

evaluate convergent validity by gauging whether abstract support items do indeed converge on a single underlying dimension.

We evaluate this using confirmatory factor analysis in the five surveys in which three democracy support items were administered ( $N_{Lucid\ 2020} = 6,010$ ;  $N_{Lucid\ 2023} = 3,485$ ;  $N_{VOTER\ 2017} = 6,100$ ;  $N_{VOTER\ 2018} = 1,329$ ;  $N_{VOTER\ 2019} = 1,903$ ). Because the VOTER survey is a panel, we limit our analyses of the 2018 and 2019 waves to fresh respondents. In each of these assessments we model a single latent factor underlying each of the democracy support items. Thus, each person's response to an item is theorized to in part reflect their general attitude toward democracy and to in part reflect measurement error. This is compatible with a standard reflective measurement model, in which distinct items are alternative indicators of a single underlying construct, and each item is influenced by that construct and a unique error term that is uncorrelated with the latent variable and with the errors of other items (Bollen, 1989). The models were estimated using mean and variance-adjusted weighted least squares. This allows us to treat the items as ordinal rather than continuous and provides standard errors and fit indices that are robust to non-normality in the observed variables.

All five confirmatory factor models show excellent fit (all robust RMSEAs = .000, robust CFIs = 1.000, robust TLIs = 1.000, and SRMRs .000). To assess how much of the variance in the democracy support items is explained by an underlying latent variable, we square each item's standardized factor loading. As displayed in Figure 2, the amount of variance explained by the latent factor varies across item type, ranging from a low of 35% for the "democratic preference" item (the only item which does not itself allow for an expression of tepid support) to a high of 85% for the "democratic importance" item. With the exception of the "democratic preference" item, a latent variable consistently explains more than 50% of the variance in citizens' responses

to the democracy support items (median=68%). For comparison, the median amount of variance in seven salient issue attitudes explained by either latent social or economic ideology was 42% in an analysis of ANES item responses (Feldman & Johnston 2014).

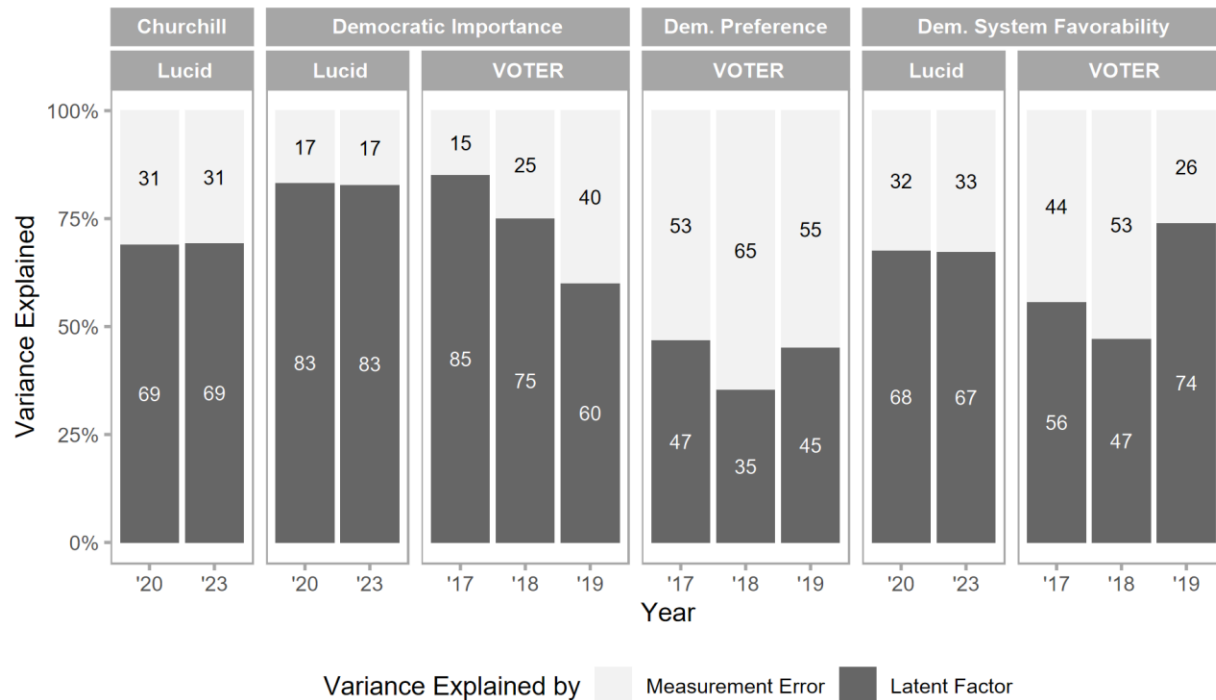


Figure 2. How Much of the Variance in Abstract Democracy Support Items Can be Explained by a Single Latent Factor?

### Temporal Stability.

We evaluate temporal stability using the VOTER survey panel in which respondents were assessed on three democracy support items on three measurement occasions, July of 2017, April of 2018, and November of 2019. We conduct a longitudinal confirmatory factor analysis, which models a single latent factor underlying each of the three democracy support items at each time point. A major issue when modeling attitudes over time is that we often do not know whether differences between measurement occasions reflect genuine change or measurement error (Cronbach and Furby, 1970; Lord, 1956; 1958). To address this, we constrain each item's factor loadings and response category thresholds to be the same across measurement occasions (a

criterion known as scalar or “strong” invariance). The rationale behind this specification is that if a set of items measure the same construct over time, the mapping between the items and the latent variable should not change (Meredith, 1993). Thus these constraints ensure that over-time variation caused by changes in how people interpret the items and use the rating scales is not absorbed by the latent factors and instead manifests as model misfit.<sup>5</sup> This allows us to perform a more stringent test of our theory that democracy support items tap a coherent underlying attitude by testing for persistence in the structure of latent democracy support.

The longitudinal confirmatory factor model with constraints shows excellent fit, suggesting that these items tap the same underlying variable across time (scaled RMSEA = .034, scaled CFI = .988, scaled TLI = .991, and SRMR .020). Having confirmed this, we can interpret the correlations between the latent variables as measures of rank-order stability. After accounting for measurement error, the rank-order stability of abstract democracy support is very high; the correlation between 2017 and 2018 levels is .85 ( $P < .000$ ), that between 2018 and 2019 levels is .87 ( $P < .000$ ), and that between 2017 and 2019 levels is .82 ( $P < .000$ ). To probe these results further, we estimate an extension of the longitudinal confirmatory factor model that partitions the latent traits into perfectly stable, auto-regressive, and occasion-specific variance components (Cole, Martin, and Steiger 2005). Note that this only breaks down variance in the latent factor, discarding variance due to measurement error. The results of this variance decomposition, shown in Figure 3, demonstrate that Americans’ orientations toward democracy are highly stable, with 78-80% of the latent trait variance accounted for by stable individual differences. Nonetheless, these results also show that there is genuine change in American’s attitudes toward democracy, accounting for 20-22% of the latent trait variance in a given year.

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<sup>5</sup> We allow the item residuals to correlate over time to account for autocorrelation in the errors.

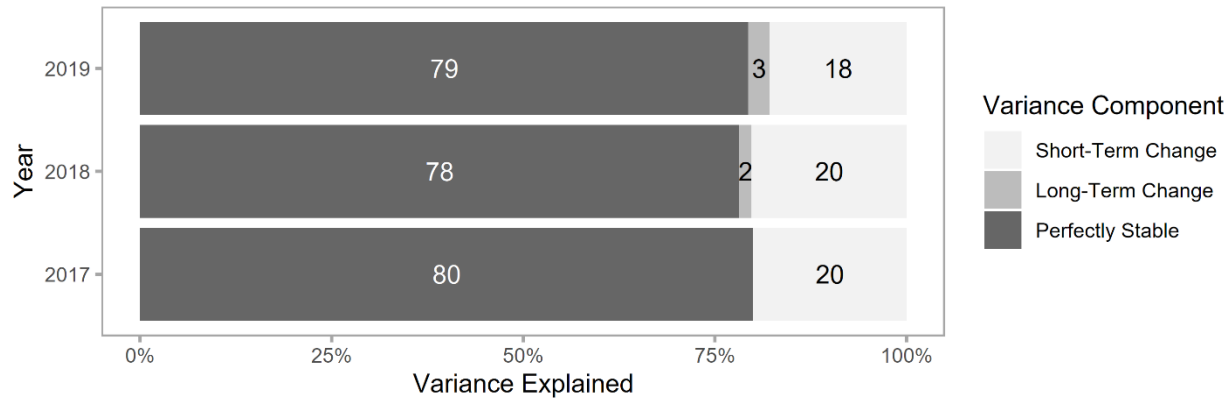


Figure 3. Stability and Change in Latent Abstract Democracy Support

### **Discriminant Validity.**

Discriminant validity refers to whether a measure is empirically distinguishable from measures of other related, but distinct, constructs. To gauge the discriminant validity of abstract support measures we test whether the items form a factor that is separate from support for authoritarian governance itself (Ariely & Davidov, 2011). While we expect support for authoritarian governance to be correlated with abstract support, we regard the latter as a theoretically and empirically distinct construct. Indeed, we find evidence for this empirical distinctiveness. In SM Part 4, we report CFAs showing that the abstract support items are psychometrically distinct from items that ask about openness to democracy-degrading actions.<sup>6</sup>

### **Criterion Validity: Support for Degrading Democracy.**

We have so far shown that reports of overwhelming majorities expressing support for democracy mask considerable variability in the extent of that support, and that abstract support

<sup>6</sup> In SM Part 5, we report analyses testing whether tepidly supportive and opposed positions on democracy are less temporally stable than committed support (Graham, 2023; Iyengar, 2023) and the extent to which this is likely to reflect inattentive responding (Westwood, Grimmer, Tyler, & Nall, 2022).

items converge on a single latent factor that possesses a high degree of rank-order stability and is distinguishable from support for authoritarian governance. If abstract democracy support matters in the American public, then it should negatively predict support for or tolerance of a wide range of democracy violations. Taken together, the present surveys include numerous items gauging support for such violations (see SM Part 3).

In an initial set of analyses, we formed an Openness to Anti-Democratic Action composite in each survey by simply averaging responses to all relevant items available in the survey and coding this to range from 0 to 1. We regressed this composite on abstract democracy support in each survey, measured as a composite of available items and also coded to range from 0 to 1. Results are displayed in Figure 4.

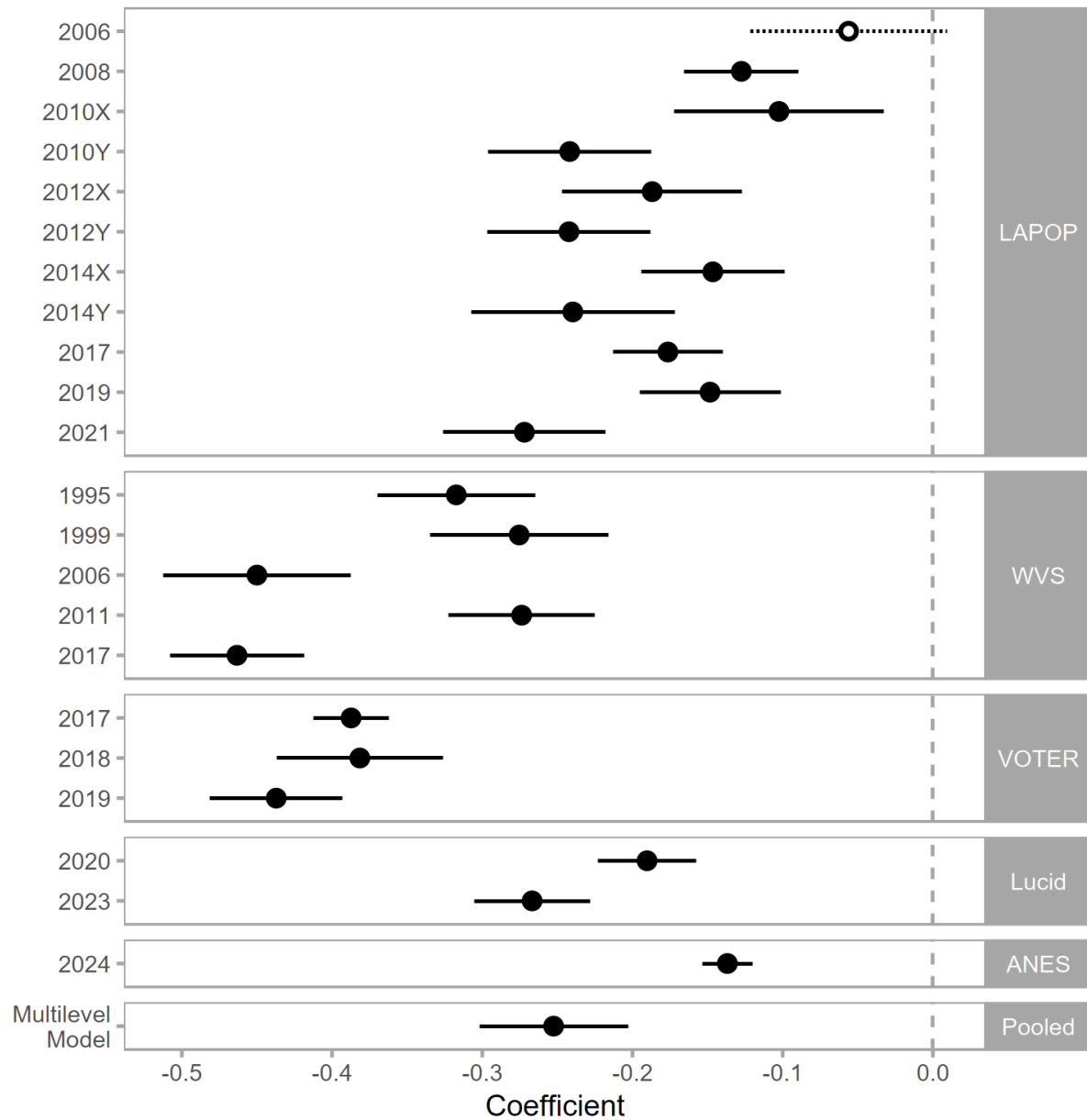


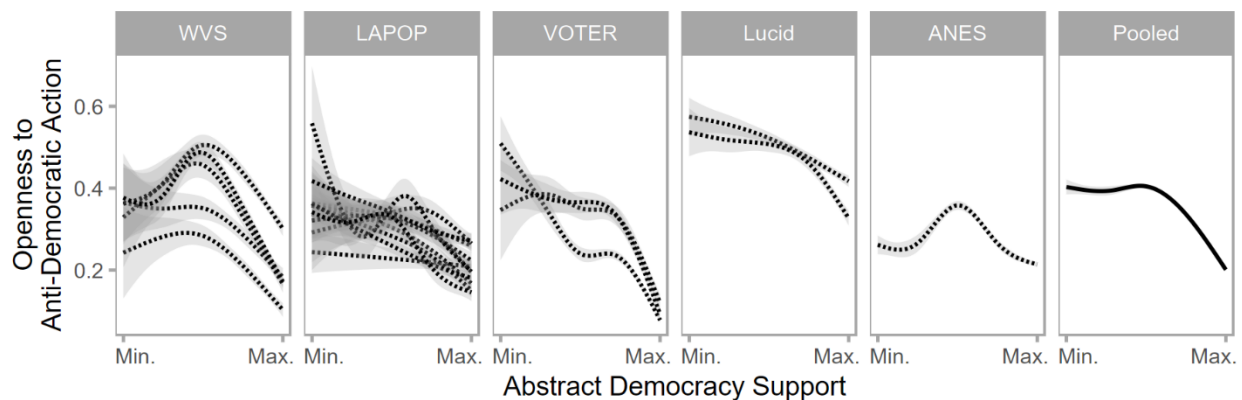
Figure 4: Effects of Abstract Democracy Support on Openness to Anti-Democratic Actions

As shown, abstract democracy support is a consistently negative predictor of openness to authoritarian governance, with a pooled multilevel regression coefficient of  $-0.25$  ( $SE = .025$ ).

Thus, going from strong opposition to strong support for democracy was on average associated with a 25 percentage point drop in openness to anti-democratic actions.<sup>7</sup>

To examine the possibility of non-linear associations, we allowed the relationship between abstract democracy support and openness to authoritarian actions to vary along the democracy support continuum. We found that its predictive power was strongest on the *supportive* side in nearly every sample. This pattern is shown in Figure 5, which plots predicted values from generalized additive models using the same data analyzed in Figure 4 (Beck & Jackman, 1998). In the pooled model, there is a relatively flat line in the lower half of the democracy support continuum and a steep downward line in the upper half of the continuum. There is thus little difference between democracy opponents and neutral respondents, on average, but there is a steep drop as one moves from middling to committed support.

Figure 5: Nonlinearity in the Relationship Between Abstract Democracy Support and Openness to Anti Democratic Action



Though abstract democracy support reliably predicts a generalized openness to anti-democratic actions, it is possible that it is more predictive of some types of democracy violations

<sup>7</sup> We examined the benefits of using multi-item abstract support measures with additional analyses of the five surveys that contained three-item measures. Results are reported in SM Part 9.

than others. To examine this, we created domain-specific democracy violation subscales and regressed these on abstract support. The results are summarized in Figure 6.

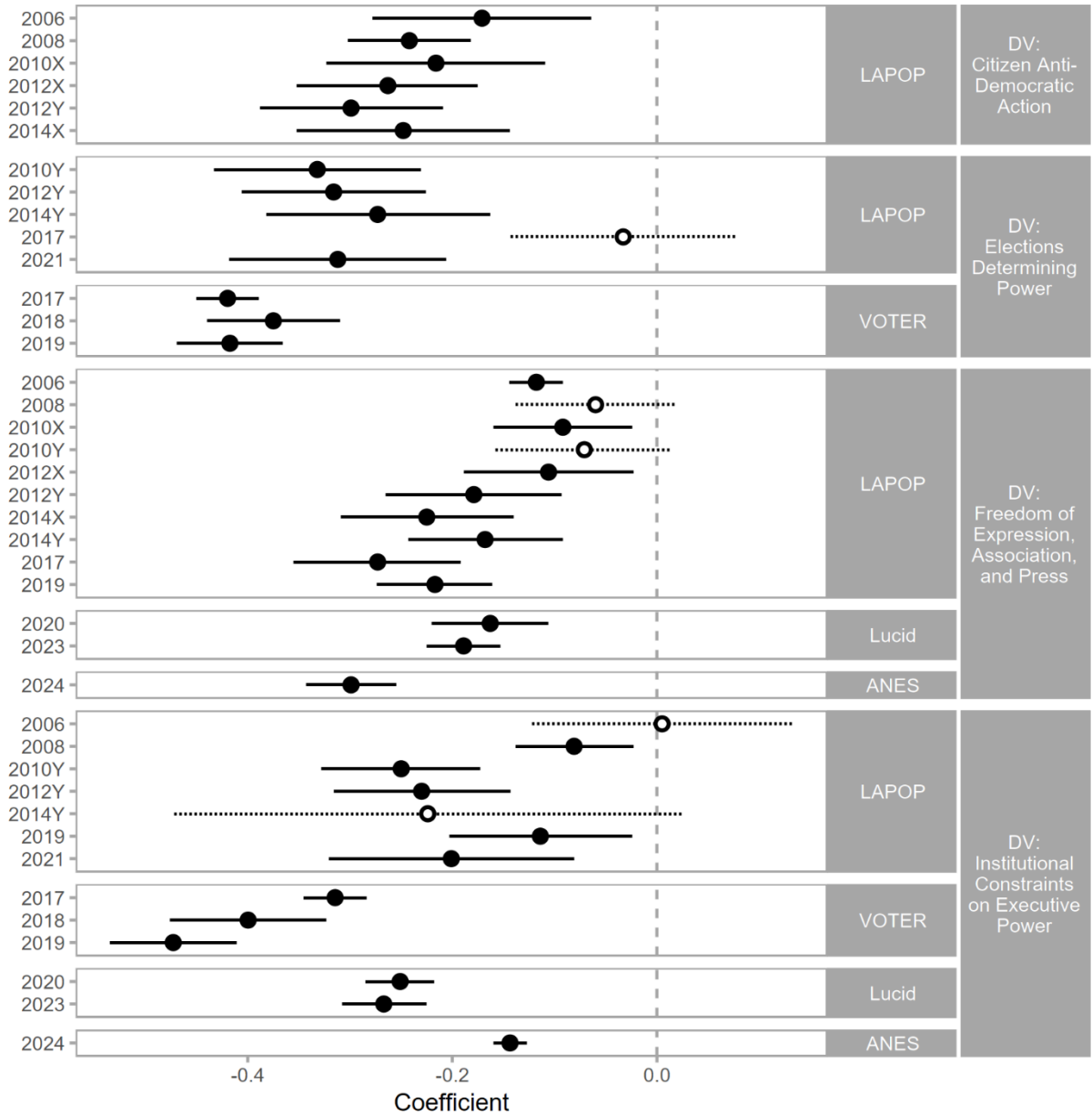
*Elections Determining Power.* We begin with measures dealing with the overthrow or weakening of an electoral system for determining who holds power. In several of the LAPOP surveys, respondents indicated whether or not they would support a military coup under dire circumstances such as rampant crime or corruption. In the WVS and VOTER surveys, they reported preference for an unelected strong leader and the army taking over the government. In each of these surveys a composite was formed with the relevant items. Coefficients were negative and significant in 7 of 8 samples, ranging from  $-.03$  to  $-.44$  with a mean of  $-.32$ .

*Institutional Constraints on Executive Power.* In the 21<sup>st</sup> century democratic backsliding frequently involves democratically elected incumbents weakening legislative, judicial, and opposition party constraints on executive power (Bermeo 2016; Svobik 2020; Waldner & Lust, 2018). Many of the LAPOP surveys and both of the Lucid surveys contain items tapping a preference for such weakening of constraints by curtailing the power of the Supreme Court and Congress to restrict executive actions. Other LAPOP surveys contained an item gauging preference for the president limiting “the voice and vote of opposition parties” for the sake of the country’s progress, the VOTER surveys assessed preference for a president being unbounded by laws and courts, and the ANES survey included items gauging support for a president disregarding the courts and legislature and evading punishment for misconduct. Forming composites with relevant items in 13 surveys, the coefficient for abstract democracy support was negative and significant in 11 of these, excluding only the small-N LAPOP 2006 and 2010 subsample X surveys. Coefficients ranged from  $.00$  to  $-.46$  with a mean of  $-.21$ .

*Freedom of Expression, Association, and Press.* Leaders presiding over a weakening of democracy frequently seek to counter the efforts of critical media through intimidation, legal action, financial audits, unfavorable regulation, and other means (Waldner & Lust, 2018). Meanwhile, by some measures, a large segment of the public supports restricting the basic democratic rights of citizens they deem threatening or undesirable (Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1982). All LAPOP surveys included items dealing with restrictions of freedom of expression and association, and many of them also included items expressing support for press restrictions. The Lucid surveys contained an item expressing support for the arrest of journalists who criticize a President one supports, and the ANES survey contained two items expressing support for press freedom to criticize politicians and ability to access information about government decision-making. Forming composites with relevant items in each scale, the coefficient for abstract democracy support was negative and significant in 11 of 13 cases, excluding only the small-N LAPOP 2006 and 2010X surveys. Coefficients ranged from  $-.06$  to  $-.30$  with a mean of  $-.17$ .

*Citizen Anti-Democratic Action.* The subscales reported above deal with elite-led debilitation of democracy. In addition, several of the LAPOP surveys included items gauging direct citizen action that is anti-democratic; in particular items gauging support for citizen groups seeking to violently overthrow an elected government and support of citizens taking the law into their own hands if the government is not adequately dealing with criminals. Forming composites with relevant items in each survey, the coefficient for abstract democracy support was negative and significant in 6 of 6 cases, ranging from  $-.17$  to  $-.30$  with a mean of  $-.24$ .

Figure 6: Effects of Abstract Democracy Support on Openness to Specific Types of Authoritarian Actions



### Criterion Validity: Using Panel Data to Explore Within-Person Relationships

The causal processes responsible for the cross-sectional relationships described above are unknown. Although we cannot make causal inferences from observational panel data, such data allow us to assess patterns of within-person change over time and gauge their compatibility with

particular causal models. Specifically, we can test whether people who become more supportive of democracy in the abstract at one point in time tend to become more opposed to authoritarian governance at the next point in time. Importantly, this result – within-person deviations predicting later within-person deviations – is not direct evidence of causality. Such a result would also be consistent with confounds influencing abstract support first and openness to authoritarian governance later. In other words, abstract support might serve as a leading indicator, capturing the effects of underlying changes that only later manifest in substantive democracy attitudes.

To explore this, we estimated a random intercept cross-lagged panel model (RI-CLPM) in the VOTER panel. RI-CLPMs are similar to the panel model described in the temporal stability section in that they decompose over-time variation into stable individual differences and within-person deviations from individual means (Hamaker, Kuiper, and Grasman, 2015).<sup>8</sup> The models then test whether within-person deviations in variable  $X$  predict the strength and direction of subsequent within-person deviations in variable  $Y$  while controlling for prior deviations in  $Y$ , and vice versa. These models have the advantage of controlling for time-invariant confounds. However, causal inferences from these models are threatened by both unmodeled time-varying confounds (whose inclusion in models would raise other complications; see Mund, Johnson, and Nestler, 2021) and the possibility that lags in the actual causal process are mismatched with lags between measurement occasions (Muthén and Asparouhov, 2024).

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<sup>8</sup> In the temporal stability section we decomposed the within-person deviations into autoregressive (“Long-Term Change”) variance and occasion-specific variance (“Short-Term Change”). In contrast, the RI-CLPM estimates the combined effects of all within-person variance.

We estimated a model with three indicators assessing latent abstract support and three indicators assessing openness to authoritarian actions (Mulder and Hamaker 2021). The model demonstrated excellent fit. As displayed in Figure 7, which presents cross-lagged effects from the analysis, there is evidence that increases in abstract democracy support predict subsequent decreases in openness to authoritarian actions. On average, people who experienced a +10 percentage point (p.p.) deviation in democracy support in 2017 experienced a -3.52 p.p. deviation in openness to authoritarian actions in 2018 ( $p = .000$ ). An equivalent deviation in 2018 democracy support predicted a -4.48 p.p. deviation in 2019 openness to authoritarian actions ( $p = .000$ ).

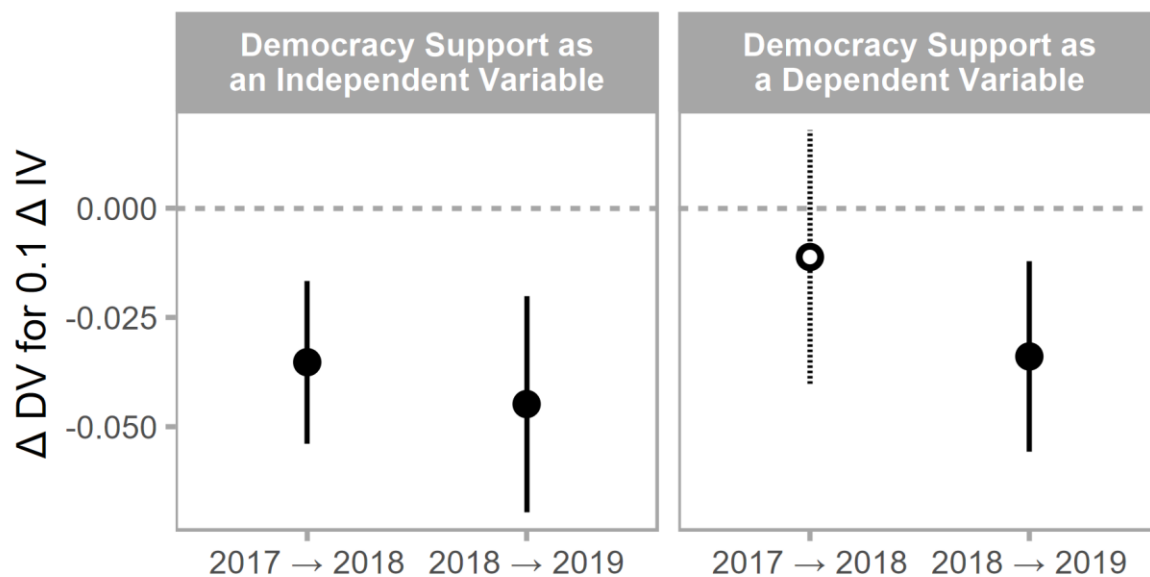


Figure 7. Within-Person Temporal Effects of Abstract Democracy Support and Openness to Authoritarian Actions. *Note:* Models estimated using mean and variance-adjusted weighted least squares. Missingness handled using pairwise deletion. Scaled fit indices:  $\chi^2/df = 942.771/149$ ; CFI = .990; RMSEA = .024; SRMR = .044.

As displayed in Figure 7, there is also some evidence of the reverse pattern. While deviations in openness to authoritarian actions in 2017 do not predict deviations in democracy

support in 2018 ( $p = .451$ ), a +10 p.p. deviation in openness to authoritarian actions in 2018 predicts a -3.39 ( $p = .002$ ) p.p. deviation in democracy support in 2019. Overall, these results show that Americans who become more supportive of ‘democracy’ consistently become less open to authoritarian actions over time, whereas there is a less consistent relationship in the opposite direction.<sup>9</sup>

### **Criterion Validity: Electoral Punishment of Anti-Democratic Candidates**

A key concern about abstract democracy support questions is that many putatively democracy supportive citizens will be willing to support an undemocratic candidate who is aligned with them on policy. In other words, professions of democracy support may be authentic and well-informed, but citizens might fail to account for how they will prioritize political over democracy-preserving aims (e.g., Svolik, 2019).

But consider that both Graham and Svolik (2020, Supplementary Material, p. 78, section E.3) and Snagovsky & Werner (2024, Supplementary Material, p. 10, Figure A2) found that single item abstract support measures somewhat track the extent of citizens’ inclination to punish anti-democratic candidates in conjoint experiments. The Graham and Svolik (2020) survey, conducted with an American national sample, reported differences in inclination to punish anti-democratic candidates across responses to the Churchill question. But these researchers also administered the democratic importance and democratic system questions to their respondents, allowing us to form a more reliable composite measure of abstract democracy support in a re-analysis of their data.<sup>10</sup> In Figure 8, we report the probability of voting for the anti-democratic

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<sup>9</sup> RI-CLPM results with openness to authoritarian governance subscales are reported in SM Part 7.

<sup>10</sup> Only half of Graham and Svolik’s sample completed the democratic importance item (843 of 1,691). We use pairwise deletion to allow all observations with non-missing values on at least two variables to inform estimation. We then calculate factor scores for all respondents based on

candidate conditional on responses to a latent democracy support variable formed with the three abstract democracy support indicators (Leeper, Hobolt, & Tilley 2020). Because the latent variable is continuous, we estimated predicted probabilities from a regression that included squared and cubed terms to allow for nonlinearity (Agadjanian et al. 2023). The results show that citizens who profess the lowest levels of democracy support tend to be indifferent between voting for or against a candidate who engages in anti-democratic behavior, as indicated by marginal means that are not significantly different from 0.5. As we move toward the democracy supportive end of the continuum, we observe drops in the anti-democratic candidate's vote share ranging from 4.6 percentage points for the democratic favorability item to 14.9 percentage points for latent democracy support. Regardless of how support is measured, the most democracy supportive respondents tend to pick the anti-democratic candidate about 35% of the time. That citizens who profess the most support still fail to punish anti-democratic candidates at a reassuring level is consistent with Graham & Svobik's (2020) argument that the American public is not a very good check on undemocratic elite behavior. However, the variation that does exist in this tendency corresponds with variation in abstract democracy support, further supporting the relevance of the latter.

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their observed data. A model specifying a single latent factor displayed excellent fit (CFI = 1.000; RMSEA = 0.000; SRMR = 0.000).

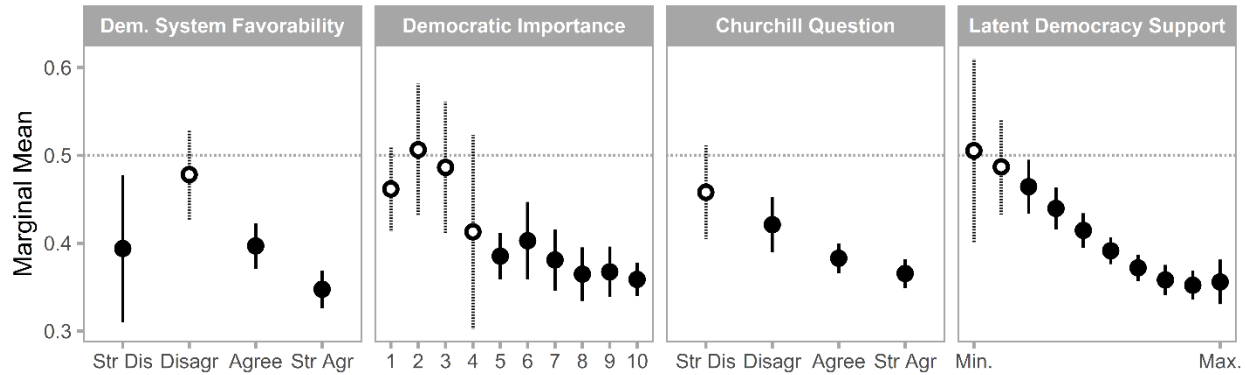


Figure 8. Probability of Preferring Anti-Democratic Candidate by Level of Abstract Democracy Support.

Next we used observational data to examine the relationship between abstract democracy support and vote choice in the 2016, 2020, and 2024 presidential elections. In each of those elections Donald Trump demonstrated anti-democratic tendencies, and thus a valid measure of democracy attitude would be expected to predict variation in preference for Trump vs. his Democratic Party opponents net of controls for ideology, partisanship, and demographics. A valid measure of democracy support would also be expected to predict political disengagement, and consequently lower turnout (e.g., Drutman et al., 2020). We therefore examine abstract democracy support as a predictor of vote in each election using multinomial logistic regressions predicting Trump vote, third party vote, or abstention against a baseline of voting for the Democratic candidate. We opted to use Democratic candidates as our reference category because they represented the only plausible alternative to the relatively undemocratic candidate.

In Table 2, we report regression models using data from the 2016 (VOTER), 2020 (VOTER and Lucid), and 2024 (ANES) elections. Abstract democracy support consistently predicted lower log-odds of voting for Trump relative to Clinton, Biden, and Harris net of party identity, ideology, and demographics. In the VOTER survey these effects even held when controlling for voting behavior in 2012, as seen in models 2 and 4. Democracy support also

predicted low log-odds of not voting and of voting for a third-party candidate relative to voting for Clinton, Biden, or Harris.

To help interpret the coefficients in Table 2, we use simulation from the observed values to estimate predicted probabilities (Hanmer and Ozan Kalkan, 2013). Figure 9 plots results from models 1, 3, 5, and 6 across the range of abstract support. While the precise patterns differ across surveys and elections (see SM Part 8 for a more detailed explanation), the probability of voting for the Democratic Party candidate consistently increases as a function of abstract democracy support. Moreover, the probability of not voting reliably decreases at higher levels of abstract support while the probability of voting for Trump either declines or stays relatively flat.

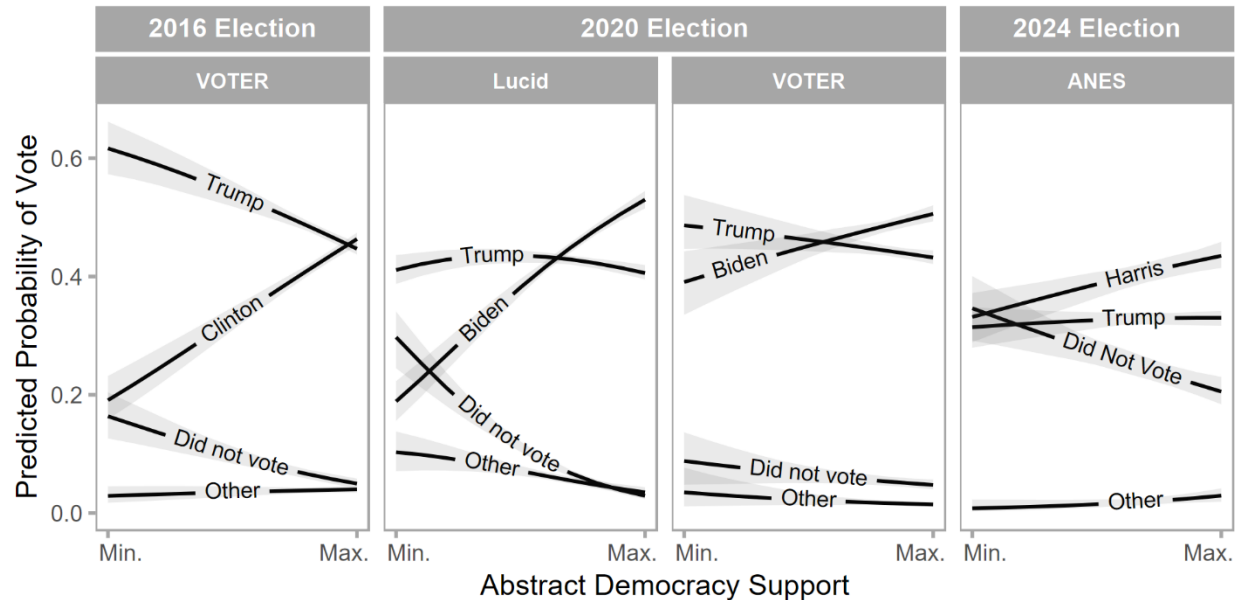
Table 2. Multinomial Logistic Regressions Predicting 2016, 2020, and 2024 Presidential Vote

| Independent Variable | Dependent Variable Level<br>(Ref. Level= Democratic Party Candidate Vote) | VOTER              |                    |                    |                    | Lucid              | ANES               |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                      |                                                                           | 2016               |                    | 2020               |                    | 2020               | 2024               |
|                      |                                                                           | (1)                | (2)                | (3)                | (4)                | (5)                | (6)                |
| Party ID             | Trump vote                                                                | 6.05***<br>(0.21)  | 4.59***<br>(0.23)  | 6.93***<br>(0.31)  | 5.44***<br>(0.37)  | 6.40***<br>(0.17)  | 7.09***<br>(0.39)  |
|                      | Other vote                                                                | 4.13***<br>(0.27)  | 3.35***<br>(0.30)  | 5.26***<br>(0.68)  | 4.03***<br>(0.86)  | 3.08***<br>(0.23)  | 3.87***<br>(0.67)  |
|                      | Did not vote                                                              | 2.72***<br>(0.24)  | 2.40***<br>(0.28)  | 3.28***<br>(0.35)  | 3.06***<br>(0.55)  | 3.06***<br>(0.21)  | 3.58***<br>(0.29)  |
| Ideology             | Trump                                                                     | 5.30***<br>(0.29)  | 3.89***<br>(0.32)  | 4.90***<br>(0.41)  | 4.32***<br>(0.54)  | 4.94***<br>(0.26)  | 4.09***<br>(0.49)  |
|                      | Other                                                                     | 2.76***<br>(0.36)  | 2.39***<br>(0.38)  | 0.64<br>(0.83)     | 0.78<br>(1.01)     | 0.82*<br>(0.33)    | 0.85<br>(1.07)     |
|                      | Did not vote                                                              | 3.21***<br>(0.31)  | 2.60***<br>(0.36)  | 2.00***<br>(0.41)  | 2.16**<br>(0.74)   | 0.72*<br>(0.30)    | 1.71***<br>(0.38)  |
| Democracy Support    | Trump                                                                     | -2.93***<br>(0.27) | -3.25***<br>(0.29) | -1.13**<br>(0.37)  | -1.51**<br>(0.50)  | -1.97***<br>(0.23) | -0.66*<br>(0.32)   |
|                      | Other                                                                     | -1.53***<br>(0.34) | -1.60***<br>(0.36) | -1.45<br>(0.75)    | -1.75*<br>(0.89)   | -2.65***<br>(0.30) | 0.93<br>(0.68)     |
|                      | Did not vote                                                              | -3.00***<br>(0.29) | -2.47***<br>(0.34) | -1.14**<br>(0.42)  | -1.17<br>(0.72)    | -3.98***<br>(0.27) | -1.12***<br>(0.25) |
| Romney Vote (2012)   | Trump                                                                     |                    | 2.57***<br>(0.16)  |                    | 2.84***<br>(0.21)  |                    |                    |
|                      | Other                                                                     |                    | 1.12***<br>(0.22)  |                    | 2.03***<br>(0.52)  |                    |                    |
|                      | Did not vote                                                              |                    | 1.27***<br>(0.23)  |                    | 1.57***<br>(0.43)  |                    |                    |
| Other Vote (2012)    | Trump                                                                     |                    | 2.12***<br>(0.26)  |                    | 1.03**<br>(0.37)   |                    |                    |
|                      | Other                                                                     |                    | 2.61***<br>(0.26)  |                    | 2.05***<br>(0.56)  |                    |                    |
|                      | Did not vote                                                              |                    | 1.16**<br>(0.40)   |                    | -0.11<br>(1.02)    |                    |                    |
| Did Not Vote (2012)  | Trump                                                                     |                    | 1.40***<br>(0.19)  |                    | 1.40***<br>(0.29)  |                    |                    |
|                      | Other                                                                     |                    | 1.23***<br>(0.23)  |                    | 0.09<br>(0.98)     |                    |                    |
|                      | Did not vote                                                              |                    | 3.30***<br>(0.17)  |                    | 3.05***<br>(0.34)  |                    |                    |
| Constant             | Trump                                                                     | -3.58***<br>(0.31) | -3.13***<br>(0.34) | -4.48***<br>(0.46) | -4.06***<br>(0.61) | -3.87***<br>(0.24) | -4.62***<br>(0.46) |
|                      | Other                                                                     | -1.53***<br>(0.36) | -1.91***<br>(0.38) | -2.30**<br>(0.85)  | -2.10*<br>(1.04)   | -1.04***<br>(0.29) | -3.81***<br>(0.99) |
|                      | Did not vote                                                              | -0.43<br>(0.31)    | -2.00***<br>(0.38) | -2.16***<br>(0.52) | -2.83**<br>(0.88)  | 0.69**<br>(0.25)   | 0.21<br>(0.32)     |
| Controls             |                                                                           | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  |
| N                    |                                                                           | 5,828              | 5,828              | 3,535              | 3,255              | 6,010              | 4,388              |
| Log Likelihood       |                                                                           | -3249.72           | -2765.21           | -1391.71           | -802.48            | -3616.54           | -3146.12           |

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

Note: Table entries are log-odds with standard errors in parentheses. Models include controls for age, gender, race, college degree, and income, as well as party identification and ideology. Full results are reported in SM Table S-6.

Figure 9: Predicted Probabilities of Vote Choice



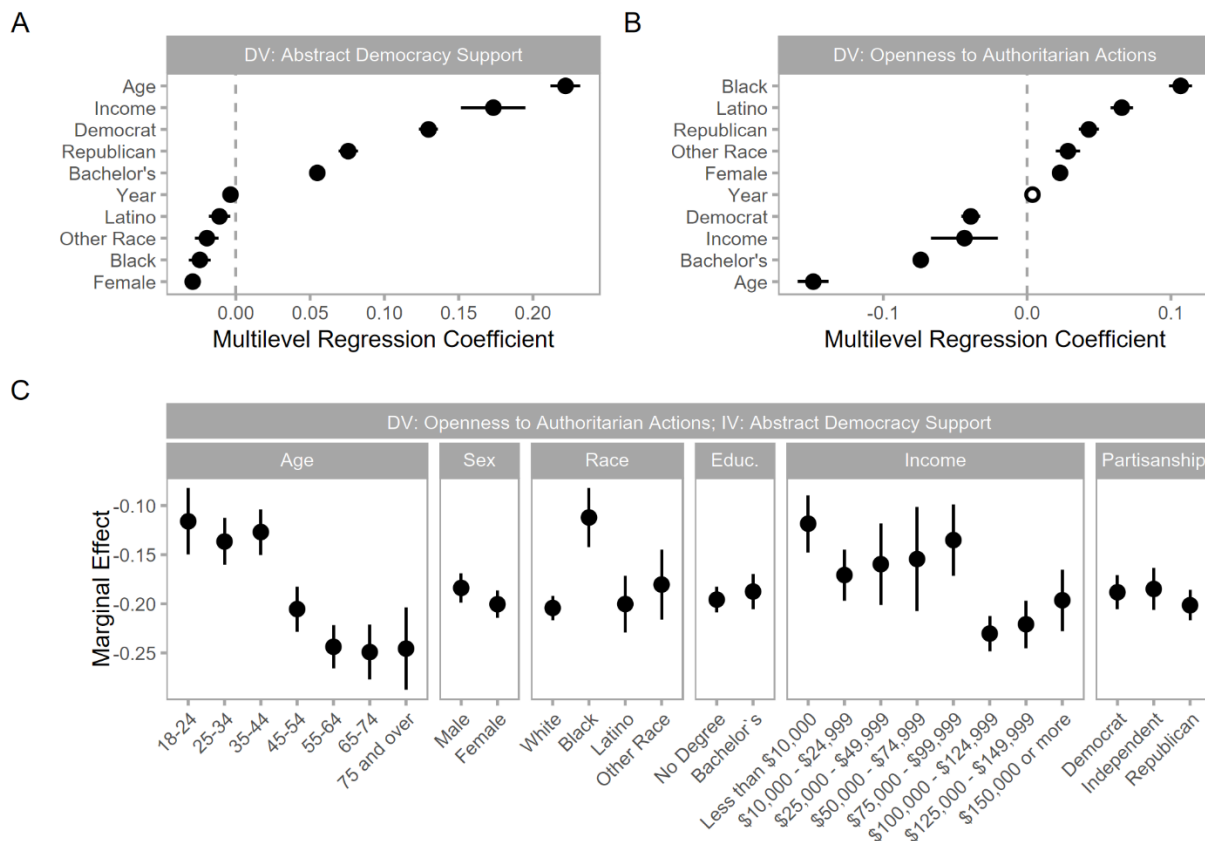
### Group Differences in Abstract Democracy Support.

In a final set of analyses we document group differences in abstract democracy support and the extent to which these correspond with group differences in openness to authoritarian actions. While our previous analyses focus on validity at the individual level, these analyses inform the extent to which partisan and demographic group differences in mean levels of abstract support validly reflect group differences in substantive anti-democratic sentiment.

Figure 10 presents fixed effects from multilevel linear models with respondents nested within surveys and random intercepts. Abstract democracy support (Panel A) and openness to authoritarian actions (Panel B) were each regressed on demographic variables, dummy codes for Democrat and Republican, and year of survey. Group differences in abstract support largely track those in openness to authoritarian actions. Older, college educated, white, male, higher income, and Democratic (vs. Independent) Americans are more democratically oriented on both types of measures. Republicans (vs. Independents) were higher in abstract support but were not

less open to authoritarian actions, although they are less democratically committed on both measures in comparison to Democrats<sup>11</sup>. Finally, as displayed in panel C, while younger and Black Americans report both less abstract democracy support and more openness to authoritarian actions, the negative within-group relationship between the two variables is weaker among these groups than it is among older and non-Black Americans.

Figure 10. Group Differences in Levels of and Relationships Between Democracy Support Measures.



Note. Regression coefficients from multilevel models with respondents nested within surveys and random intercepts. All variables coded to range from 0 to 1. LAPOP 2010, 2012, and 2014

<sup>11</sup> A potential concern is that inattentive respondents are interpreting the term “democracy” as support for the Democratic Party. However, findings show that Republicans’ lower levels of professed support in comparison to Democrats is not exacerbated by inattentive responding; rather the link is diminished among inattentive respondents.

surveys are each split into subsample X and Y surveys, and VOTER 2018 and 2019 only include fresh respondents. The baseline category in plots A and B is an 18 year old white male Independent without a Bachelor's degree in 1995.

## **Discussion**

Driven by heightened concerns about the durability of American democracy, scholars are devoting a great deal of attention to democratic commitment within the American public.

Democratic degradation is an outcome of elite behavior, and there is debate about the extent of the public's role in facilitating it (Bermeo, 2003; Bartels, 2023; Claassen, 2020; Welzel & Inglehart, 2008). But at a minimum democracies provide a chance for the public to electorally disincentivize anti-democratic elite behavior. Since 2016, the U.S. public has transmitted a message to elites that anti-democratic behavior is not prohibitively costly in elections and might even attract pockets of enthusiastic support.

But citizens vary in their democratic inclinations, both between-persons (Claassen et al., 2025) and over time at the individual level (Braley et al., 2023). Efforts to capture this variation often involve survey questions gauging abstract democracy support. But reliance on these items has been accompanied by long-running concerns about their meaning and validity. If most citizens uncritically report positive feelings toward democracy, how can such a dimension meaningfully capture variation in democratic commitment?

Our reevaluation of the published literature and new evidence provides some insight into this matter as it pertains to the U.S. case. While the cultural connotations of the term 'democracy' are largely positive, many Americans arrive at a more tempered evaluation of the construct. There are a meaningful number of democracy opponents, but the bulk of variation

exists between tepid and strong supporters. This variation is obscured when survey researchers estimate the percentage of the population with any type of positive orientation.

And this variation appears to provide useful information. The commonly used items querying abstract democracy support converge on a single latent dimension, and this dimension – particularly variation on its democracy-supportive side – predicts reactions to a wide range of democratic violations. And while nothing in the present findings challenges concerns about the public’s capacity to serve as a check on undemocratic elite behavior, abstract democracy support – measured with a multi-item scale – does seem to correspond with variation in this tendency. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that even at the highest level of abstract democracy support, Americans are still likely to prioritize partisan and policy aims over the aim of upholding democracy. But abstract democracy support appears to either reflect or constitute a counteractive pressure on this tendency.

Our evaluation of abstract democracy support questions was guided by a theoretical perspective about the nature of the underlying construct and its relationship to empirical indicators. Rather than considering items in isolation, we posited a reflective measurement model in which a latent construct drives variation on item responses with the latter also subject to random measurement error. As for the construct itself, we posited a general attitude, with both temporally stable and situationally fluctuating components, that summarizes, predicts, and potentially influences reactions to democratic violations.

A key contribution of this research is an enhanced focus on tepid democracy support. When predicting openness to authoritarian actions, tepid supporters were on average closer to democracy opponents than to committed supporters. It is possible that what these groups share is a mixed set of pro- and anti-democratic considerations (Zaller & Feldman, 1990), with the latter

sometimes tempering aversion to authoritarian actions. This could also account for why these groups, especially democracy opponents, display more variable responding to individual abstract support items over time (see SM Part 5). That said, tepid supporters were more inclined to punish anti-democratic candidates in comparison to democracy opponents. Future research might try to better explain when different intervals of the abstract support continuum are most significant. As a general matter, our findings reinforce arguments that one should consider variation across the full continuum of democracy attitude constructs (Hall et al., 2026).

Though most work on citizens' conceptualizations of and reactions to the concept of democracy is done from a comparative perspective, this research is situated in the context of American politics. We opted to focus on the U.S. in part because of the dangerous possibility of democratic deconsolidation and its powerful implications for the rest of the world. But there are also particular attributes of the U.S. that make it more likely that abstract support would matter. First of all there is evidence for generational decline in abstract democracy support in the US (Claassen & Magalhães, 2023) that does not appear to be present in other Western democracies (Voeten, 2017; Wuttke, Gavras, & Schoen, 2022). Second, the US is a country whose national ethos is intimately tied to the idea of democracy but in which debate about the desirability of democracy stretches back to the founding (Achen & Bartels, 2017, Chapter 2). In recent years some partisan elites have transmitted messages that the U.S. should be regarded as a republic, in contrast to a democracy (Masket, 2022; Thrush, 2020). More generally, U.S. partisans who perceive that their political opponents are misusing the term 'democracy' to justify destructive actions (e.g., Krishnarajan, 2023) can come to have mixed feelings about the term or to view it cynically as part of a manipulative rhetorical strategy. And many Americans might simply feel that a democratic system of government is not working well for them, and may therefore wish to

shake things up (Petersen, Osmundsen, & Arceneaux, 2023). All of this may lead to a subjective degradation of the term ‘democracy’ and, perhaps in part as a result of this, greater support for violating democratic norms and institutions. If that is the case, then it would be useful to monitor changes in mean levels of abstract support or the degree to which middling to low support is concentrated within particular American subgroups. Such changes might signify shifts in the political incentives of elites to degrade or uphold democracy.

The extent to which the present findings generalize outside of the US is a matter for future research to address. That said, cross-national research on abstract support has to contend with challenges of cross-national variation in conceptualizations of democracy as well as the issue of how to treat differences in measurement properties across countries (Ariely & Davidov, 2011; Canache, 2012; Kirsch & Welzel, 2019; Lagos, 2003; Osterberg-Kaufman et al., 2020; Ulbricht, 2018). Given that citizens with long experience of democracy are more likely to define it correctly (e.g., Chapman et al., 2023), individual differences in abstract support might be more meaningful within consolidated democracies such as the U.S.

Notwithstanding these challenges, it is useful to consider the potential relevance of these findings for models of democratic backsliding that address the public’s potential to constrain democratic deterioration. According to Svobik’s (2020) influential model, populations contain a subset of ‘informed’ voters who vote on the basis of policy proximity and are averse to anti-democratic electoral manipulation, and “uninformed” voters who are vulnerable to such manipulation. The upshot of this model is that elites will be motivated to engage in anti-democratic electoral manipulations to the extent that the population is ideologically polarized, because under these circumstances ideologically supportive voters would endure too great a policy cost by defecting to the pro-democracy opponent. In the baseline model, informed voters

possess this aversion to anti-democratic action to the same extent (quantified as a “civic virtue” parameter) and between-person variation in responses to abstract support items is argued to be irrelevant to voters’ inclination to resist authoritarian leadership.

In line with this, Svolik (2020) notes a small non-significant correlation between the Churchill item and inclination to punish a policy-matched anti-democratic candidate among Venezuelan citizens. Meanwhile, Graham and Svolik’s (2020) extension of this model allows for between-person variation in value placed on democracy, but the authors express skepticism about the relevance of abstract support for such value. The present findings do not challenge the position that partisan and policy considerations outweigh abstract democracy support in vote decisions involving an anti-democratic candidate. But they do suggest that individual variation in the value placed on democracy might relate meaningfully to willingness to electorally punish anti-democratic candidates. As with other attitude constructs of interest to political scientists, a fair test of abstract democracy support’s predictive power should be mindful of the presence of random error in individual survey items and aggregate across items to better assess the underlying construct (e.g., Ansolabehere, Rodden, & Snyder, 2008; Bakker & Lelkes, 2018). More generally, our re-analysis of Graham & Svolik (2020) adds to a growing line of evidence that individual differences in democracy attitudes (Claassen, 2026) and conceptualizations (Wunsch et al., 2022) predict punishment of anti-democratic candidates.

It is possible that better measurement of abstract support might yield insight that is useful to consider with respect to other models of democratic backsliding as well. For example, Gratton and Lee’s (2024) model posits that voters choose illiberal candidates when circumstances make them prioritize unconstrained action to deal with threats (such as terror attacks) over protection of liberty. An extension of their model allows voters to vary in their

relative values of security and liberty, but all voters are posited to perceive to an equal extent that illiberal leaders will (a) manipulate information for electoral advantage and (b) enhance security through their capability to take decisive action. But abstract support might reflect an encompassing attitude that summarizes not only the relative valuing of security and liberty but also variation in the extent to which authoritarian leaders are viewed as a threat to liberty and a boon to security. We hope that future research will address this possibility using high quality measurement of abstract support.

A key limitation of this research is that it does not provide a handle on causal direction. Level of abstract democracy support might largely summarize a citizen's inclinations to respond to diverse anti-democratic policies, appeals, and elites. The VOTER findings are consistent with multiple explanations, and are subject to the well-known limitations of causal inference from observational panel designs (Bellemare, Masaki, & Pepinsky, 2017; Muthén & Asparouhov, 2024). For example, abstract support may be a relatively early manifestation of an underlying process that will later influence substantive democracy attitudes. However, it is possible that abstract democracy support takes on a life of its own, exerting causal influence on further reactions to democracy violations. When evaluating a democratic violation, citizens might not only draw on their perceptions of the political implications but also call to mind their general feeling about how important democracy actually is to them. We hope that future research will use experimental data to test whether abstract support exerts causal influence on support for democracy violations and anti-democratic candidates. The present findings raise the possibility that abstract democracy support is a distinct attitude that is implicated in the processes by which Americans encourage or disincentivize elite anti-democratic behavior.

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