

Isermann, Lukas; Gärtner, Lea; Schoen, Harald

Article — Published Version

## Committed Democrats? How Trade-off Specific Cues Affect Expressions of Support for Liberal and Democratic Principles

Politische Vierteljahresschrift

*Suggested Citation:* Isermann, Lukas; Gärtner, Lea; Schoen, Harald (2024) : Committed Democrats? How Trade-off Specific Cues Affect Expressions of Support for Liberal and Democratic Principles, Politische Vierteljahresschrift, ISSN 1862-2860, Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, Wiesbaden, Vol. 65, Iss. 3, pp. 553-568,  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-024-00540-3>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/315574>

### Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

### Terms of use:

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



# Committed Democrats? How Trade-off Specific Cues Affect Expressions of Support for Liberal and Democratic Principles

Lukas Isermann · Lea Gärtner · Harald Schoen

Received: 25 August 2023 / Revised: 29 February 2024 / Accepted: 6 March 2024 / Published online: 28 March 2024  
© The Author(s) 2024

**Abstract** Democratic stability depends on citizens' willingness to support the application of liberal and democratic principles. Yet recent experimental research leaves doubt whether the high levels of abstract support for liberal democratic norms found in the literature translate to individuals defending these norms, even against their own interests. We argue that support for liberal and democratic principles involves trade-offs when people can determine the costs and benefits of these principles for their own political agendas. In consequence, their support for the application of these norms differs from their abstract support for the same principles. Using data from two surveys on German citizens' attitudes toward climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, we show that trade-off specific cues affect people's expressions of support for liberal and democratic norms in line with their interests. Individuals who are more concerned about a crisis are less willing to support norms that impede the implementation of their preferred policies. As support for the application of liberal and democratic norms significantly diverges from expressed levels of abstract support, the informative value of the latter regarding the stability of liberal democratic regimes is called into question.

**Keywords** Democratic stability · Procedural preferences · Policy preferences · Climate change · COVID-19

**Replication Material** The data and replication material that support the findings of this study are openly available under the Open Science Framework (OSF) at [https://osf.io/jmzpq/?view\\_only=0765929e69574c0a927d2d9ee6126ded](https://osf.io/jmzpq/?view_only=0765929e69574c0a927d2d9ee6126ded).

✉ Lukas Isermann · Lea Gärtner · Harald Schoen  
School of Social Sciences, University of Mannheim, A5, 6, 68159 Mannheim, Germany  
E-Mail: [lukas.isermann@uni-mannheim.de](mailto:lukas.isermann@uni-mannheim.de)

## Überzeugte Demokraten? Wie positionsbezogene Informationen die Unterstützung für liberale und demokratische Normen beeinflussen

**Zusammenfassung** Die Stabilität von Demokratien hängt von der Bereitschaft ihrer Bürger ab, die Anwendung liberaler und demokratischer Normen zu unterstützen. Jüngere Forschungsergebnisse mit Conjoint-Experimenten lassen jedoch Zweifel daran aufkommen, ob die in der Literatur festgestellte hohe abstrakte Unterstützung für liberal-demokratische Normen wirklich dazu führt, dass Individuen diese Normen auch gegen ihre eigenen Interessen verteidigen. Wir argumentieren, dass Menschen ihre Unterstützung für liberale und demokratische Normen anpassen, wenn Auswirkungen auf ihre eigene politische Agenda zu erwarten sind. Daher unterscheidet sich die abstrakte Unterstützung von der Unterstützung für die Anwendung derselben Normen. Anhand von Umfragedaten zur Haltung deutscher Bürger zum Klimawandel und der COVID-19-Pandemie zeigen wir, dass positionsbezogene Informationen im Fragetext die Unterstützung für liberale und demokratische Normen im Einklang mit den politischen Positionen der Befragten beeinflussen. Personen, die sich mehr Sorgen um eine der beiden Krisen machen, sind weniger bereit, Normen zu unterstützen, die die Umsetzung ihrer bevorzugten Policies behindern. Da die Unterstützung für die Anwendung liberaler und demokratischer Normen signifikant von der abstrakten Unterstützung abweicht, stellen die Ergebnisse der Studie die Aussagekraft abstrakter Unterstützungswerte für die Stabilität liberal-demokratischer Systeme in Frage.

**Schlüsselwörter** Demokratische Stabilität · Demokratische Verfahrenspräferenzen · Politische Präferenzen · Klimawandel · COVID-19

### 1 Introduction

Despite high levels of public support for liberal democracy in polls (e.g., Hernández 2016; Inglehart 2003; Norris 2011; Zilinsky 2019), political scientists have recently documented a crisis of democracy around the world (e.g., Coppedge 2017; Diamond 2020; Foa and Mounk 2016; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Nowadays, liberal democratic decline is marked by the gradual deconsolidation of political pluralism, civil liberties, and the rule of law rather than by sweeping coups (Bermeo 2016; Diamond 2020; Maeda 2010). Democratically elected leaders like Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Recep Erdoğan in Turkey use the power vested in them by the people to dismantle and instrumentalize important liberal democratic institutions and the free press (Huq and Ginsburg 2018). This deconsolidation from within is possible because voters support, or at least refrain from punishing, their representatives' antidemocratic and illiberal behavior (Carey et al. 2022; Luo and Przeworski 2022). This suggests that some people support liberal and democratic norms at the abstract level but do not act accordingly in day-to-day politics.

Ideally, democratic support is conceived as independent from specific political contexts. In the classical understanding (Easton 1965, 1975), regime support—in contrast to specific support for political authorities—is conceived as diffuse and

largely unresponsive to changes in day-to-day politics, strongly shaping people's choices involving regime principles. However, recent research on individuals' norm support and their willingness to vote for candidates not adhering to liberal and democratic norms challenges this assumption (Carey et al. 2022; Fossati et al. 2022; Graham and Svolik 2020; Lewandowsky and Jankowski 2023; Saikkonen and Christensen 2022), especially in contexts with increased political polarization (Arbatli and Rosenberg 2021; Svolik 2019, 2020; van der Brug et al. 2021) and during crises such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, or economic shocks (Amat et al. 2020; Arceneaux et al. 2020; Ballard-Rosa et al. 2021, 2022; Marbach et al. 2021).

This research points to discrepancies between abstract support and support for the practical application of these norms across different contexts, raising the question of whether citizens are really that principled when it comes to their support for liberal and democratic norms. We investigated whether and how even generic references to broader political issues influence expressions of norm support by evoking trade-off-specific cues, which enable individuals to evaluate the costs and benefits of specific liberal and democratic norms for their political agendas. Depending on their evaluation, people may uphold principles that benefit their agenda but reject norms that impede the implementation of their positions, irrespective of their abstract support for the same principles. Given that many evaluations of democratic stability rely on questions about abstract norm support (cf. European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure 2023), existing empirical results may not be very informative regarding people's support for the practical application of liberal and democratic norms in real-life settings.

To test the expectation that expressions of support for liberal and democratic norms are affected by trade-off-specific cues, we used data from two online surveys querying German citizens' attitudes on climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic alongside their support for selected norms in the abstract and against the backdrop of these issues (henceforth called contextualized support). Complementing recent experimental research from Graham and Svolik (2020), Carey et al. (2022), Saikkonen and Christensen (2022), and others, we find considerable differences in individuals' abstract support for liberal and democratic norms and for the application of these norms when trade-off-specific cues are present. The more concerned individuals are about climate change, and the more precautions against COVID-19 they take, the lower their expressed support for these principles being applied to people on the other side of these issues. Hence, even generic references to political issues prompt people to express different levels of norm support, suggesting that abstract measures substantially overestimate people's dedication to democratic and liberal principles.

## 2 Theorizing Support for Liberal and Democratic Norms in Real-World Settings

People who support liberal and democratic principles in the abstract will usually strive to uphold them—at least in theory (cf. Quintelier and Van Deth 2014). In reality, however, goal conflicts may arise between democratic norms and substantive goals. Accordingly, people likely have to make trade-offs in their evaluations of

liberal and democratic norms, suggesting that contextualized support for these norms will equal abstract support only if trade-off-specific features do not matter (cf. Kingzette et al. 2021). This could be the case if people always decided in line with their abstract principles or if the goals expected to be attained by transgressing these norms were not important to people; however, this seems unlikely given that many political decisions severely affect people's interests or deep-seated convictions, such as moral intuitions, personal values, and national or ethnic identity (e.g., Armingeon and Bürgisser 2021; Graham et al. 2009). Hence, individuals confronted with such trade-offs may justify transgressions of liberal and democratic norms to achieve their policy objectives.

Supporting this argument, recent research shows that despite high levels of abstract democratic support, voters willingly ignore breaches of democratic norms in exchange for policy congruence (e.g., Carey et al. 2022; Graham and Svobik 2020; Lewandowsky and Jankowski 2023; Saikkonen and Christensen 2022). Strikingly, individuals subconsciously rationalize breaches of liberal and democratic norms within their political in-group as democratic behavior, while condemning similar behavior from opposing politicians (Krishnarajan 2023). This provides further evidence for a discrepancy between abstract and contextualized support for liberal and democratic norms. Existing research also shows that people's preferences regarding direct democratic procedures are shaped by trade-off-specific cues (Landwehr and Harms 2020; Steiner and Landwehr 2023; Werner 2020), suggesting that large parts of the electorate evaluate procedures based on their expected outcomes (Landwehr et al. 2017; Landwehr and Harms 2020). The mechanism we assume has thus already been documented for other types of democratic attitudes.

Yet not everybody will respond to trade-offs between liberal and democratic principles and other valued goals in the same way. For people whose support of liberal and democratic principles is based on strong convictions, these principles should always prevail over competing goals. The reactions observed in existing literature may be more likely when abstract norm support is weak or not anchored by reasoning about substantive principles, or when competing goals are perceived as sufficiently important to override these principles. In this case, asking about abstract support in isolation will lead to very different evaluations than questions including trade-off-specific cues (cf. Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992). As people want to see issues tackled in a specific way, support or opposition to certain principles may seem beneficial depending on their issue positions. Considering the different evaluations of (un)democratic behavior of in- and outgroup members (Krishnarajan 2023) and the relevance of trade-off-specific cues for the support of direct democratic procedures (Landwehr and Harms 2020; Werner 2020), people can be expected to uphold norms for one issue while rejecting the very same norms for another issue. Hence, we hypothesize that *expressions of support for liberal and democratic principles in the context of political issues are influenced by individuals' predispositions toward these issues*, as the included cue allows most people to ascertain their potential gains and losses from supporting a norm. By implication, we expect that contextualized support is not fully determined by abstract support for the same principles.

This mechanism should be enhanced during crises such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, which can only be resolved collectively and need near-uni-

versal adherence to one solution, impeding their resolution with democratic means (cf. Howe 2017). In light of the urgency of these two crises, the inertia inherent in democratic processes may persuade people who feel strongly about these issues that breaches of liberal and democratic norms are justified to avoid life-threatening ramifications (cf. Mittiga 2021). For climate change, this urgency manifests in the rising number of extreme weather events around the world (cf. Eckstein et al. 2021) and the popularity of protest movements such as Fridays for Future (e.g., Sommer and Haunss 2020; Thackeray et al. 2020), which both contribute to an increasing awareness of the impacts of climate change in Western democracies (Flynn et al. 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic involves an even sharper trade-off between public health and liberal and democratic principles (Amat et al. 2020; Engler et al. 2021). To contain the pandemic, many countries resorted to restricting civil rights such as the freedom of movement and assembly. To enable their governments to react quickly to the pandemic situation, parliaments handed over vast executive power, although countries with strong democratic institutions were more hesitant to breach democratic norms to contain the pandemic (Engler et al. 2021). On the individual level, lockdown policies generally gave rise to authoritarian attitudes (Marbach et al. 2021). The pandemic also led to a sharp increase in support for technocratic government and prompted people to relinquish civil liberties more readily than in the context of climate change or terrorism (Amat et al. 2020).

### 3 Research Design

To explore differences between abstract and contextualized support for liberal and democratic norms and to test our hypothesis, we used two separate online surveys querying German citizens' attitudes in the context of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Germany is a highly stable democracy (see V-Dem 2023, cited as Coppedge et al. 2023; Pemstein et al. 2023) in which citizens routinely express high levels of support for liberal democracy (e.g., Inglehart 2003; Wuttke et al. 2020), suggesting resilience to antidemocratic tendencies. Therefore, diverging levels of abstract and contextualized support in Germany would indicate even more severe misperceptions of democratic support in other cases.

The first survey was fielded in spring 2020 and focused on climate change attitudes. In 2019, Germany experienced a sharp rise in climate change protests, and the issue dominated the political discourse (Statista 2019). Although the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic hit before the collection period and would soon become the defining political topic, climate change was still highly salient at the time of the survey (Umweltbundesamt 2020).

The second survey (Navarrete et al. 2022) was collected in fall 2020 and queried German citizens' attitudes about the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 1 for detailed information on both surveys). At the time, Germany had just entered a new stage of containment policies, mandating the closing of bars and restaurants and limiting personal contacts and movement (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit 2023). Although protests against the containment policies had started to gain traction prior to the col-

**Table 1** Overview of survey data used

Survey	N	Collection period	Sample	Quotas	Collection mode
1	2000	03/17–04/19/2020	German	Sex, age,	Computer-assisted
2	3264	11/26–12/24/2020	citizens (18+)	education	web-based interviews

lection time (Hippert and Saul 2021), public support for the government remained high (Wagschal et al. 2020). In contrast to the close cooperation of most parliamentary parties to contain the pandemic, the far right Alternative for Germany party (AfD) increasingly opposed the containment policies and even allowed protesters access to the Bundestag, where they harassed members of parliament and cabinet members (Hippert and Saul 2021).

Both surveys used samples drawn from online access panels based on representative quotas for sex, age, and education. Although quotas cannot prevent the realized sample from being biased toward internet users, the proposed mechanism is expected to work independently of respondents' online affinity. Even if this assumption failed, the validity of the results should not be affected, as we focus on intraindividual rather than interindividual differences.

To assess how often support for liberal and democratic norms conflicts with issue-specific positions, we first examined how many respondents have strong preferences about these norms as well as climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic. We measured abstract norm support with a battery of items querying respondents' agreement with the statements in Table 2 on a five-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." For the analyses, we rescaled the responses to range between 0 and 1 and reversed items where higher values indicated support for norm transgressions for consistency (see Online Appendix 1 for question wording and coding).

Rather than aiming to cover the full range of liberal and democratic norms, we presented a diverse set of measures capturing support for the current liberal democratic system in Germany. The items listed in Table 2 speak to core liberal democratic principles such as the division of powers, the protection and political inclusion of minorities, the freedom of speech, and equality before the courts, which are routinely used to measure the quality of democracy (see, e.g., Freedom House Index [Freedom House 2023] and V-Dem [Coppedge et al. 2023; Pemstein et al. 2023]). Less common in research on democratic stability, the consideration of group interests captures fair political competition, which is linked to minority protection as interest groups mediate between citizens' interests and the political systems (Binderkrantz 2020; Schlozman et al. 2012). Lastly, support for violence in political conflict provides a warning sign for democratic deconsolidation (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Saikkonen and Christensen 2022).

Individual predispositions toward climate change were measured with an item asking respondents how worried they were about climate change, with answers ranging from 1 ("not worried at all") to 5 ("extremely worried"). We relied on respondents' concern about climate change instead of their belief in climate change or their positions on more specific climate policies because concern offers an indication of respondents' general stance toward climate action independent of their

**Table 2** Items measuring support for liberal and democratic norms

Liberal and democratic norm	Statement
Monopoly of violence	The use of force is never justified to pursue political goals
Legal process	Everybody should have the right to bring a court action against a political decision if they see their rights curtailed
Division of powers/ parliamentary control	To solve our problems, we need a strong government whose decisions are not questioned by parliament
Interest groups	The influence of the various interest groups in our society and their demands on the government harm the public welfare
<i>Additional statements in survey 2</i>	
Minority protection	The interests of the entire population should always come before the interests of individuals
Freedom of speech	Everybody should have the right to express their opinion even though the majority has a different opinion

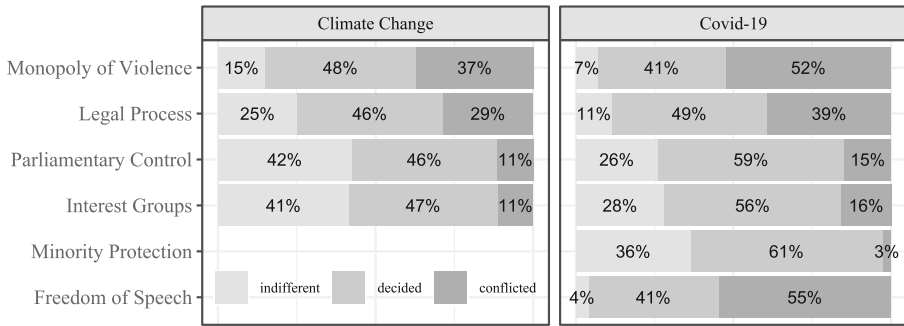
support for specific climate policies, which tend to come with considerable trade-offs (Armingeon and Bürgisser 2021). However, when we measured respondents' stances on climate change as the mean of their positions on four mitigation and three adaptation items, the effects were substantively unchanged and even more pronounced (Online Appendix 3).

Unfortunately, an analogous measure for respondents' concern about the COVID-19 pandemic was unavailable. We therefore used a battery of questions about COVID-19 prevention measures to construct an additive index counting the number of measures respondents had taken in the last week. Measures included actions such as washing one's hands longer and more often, wearing a mask even where not required, or avoiding personal contacts, indicating that respondents had gone beyond the current directives to prevent infections. Because more measures taken suggest greater worry for themselves or their loved ones, the constructed index should reasonably capture concern about the pandemic (see Online Appendix 1 for question wording and coding).

Figure 1 displays the percentages of respondents who value both the selected norms and are concerned about the respective crisis, those who either value the norm or are concerned, and those who value neither. Conflicts may arise in the first group if the trade-off-specific cue indicates that norm support is detrimental to the implementation of people's issue preferences. Depending on the norm, between 3% (minority protection) and 55% (freedom of speech) of respondents experience conflicts between policy goals and norm support. On average, every fourth respondent thus has reason to compromise their norm support in order to strengthen their preferred policy agenda.

To test whether trade-off-specific cues affect support for liberal and democratic norms, we considered the differences between respondents' abstract and their contextualized norm support. Contextualized support was measured with a battery of questions that were worded very similar to the items for abstract support but that re-





**Fig. 1** Potential for conflict between liberal and democratic norms and issue positions. Depicted are the percentages of respondents who value the respective norm and are concerned about climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic (conflicted), those who either value the norm or are concerned (decided), and those who value neither (indifferent). Respondents are assumed to value the respective norm or be concerned if their answer is above the midpoint of the scale. Source: Survey 1 for climate change, survey 2 for the COVID-19 pandemic

late to a specific political issue.<sup>1</sup> For instance, the cued item on parliamentary control reads as follows: “To effectively combat [climate change | the spread of pandemics], the government’s capacity to act must not be limited by the parliament.” (See Online Appendix 1 for the wording of all items.) The framing of the cued items clearly favored one position, making it easy for respondents to judge whether protecting the norm would hurt or advance their agenda. Abstract and contextualized support were queried in the same survey, precluding the possibility that shifts in contextualized support were based on unobserved shifts in abstract support. In both surveys, respondents were asked to report their abstract norm support before answering any questions on the substantive issue, and they saw at least 15 other screens between the batteries on abstract and contextualized support.

We used regression analysis to examine to what degree citizens’ contextualized norm support was determined by their abstract support and their positions on cued issues. To this end, we included respondents’ abstract support for the respective norm as well as their positions on climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic as independent variables in an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Analogous to a lagged dependent variable (e.g., Keele and Kelly 2006), the inclusion of respondents’ support for the abstract norm as an independent variable controls for the influence of factors that affect both abstract and contextualized support. In consequence, the effects of the remaining independent variables relate to the variance in contextualized support that cannot be explained by the determinants of abstract support. Thus, the model only needs to include independent variables that explain contextualized but not abstract support for liberal and democratic norms. By impli-

<sup>1</sup> For monopoly of violence and legal process, the direction of the abstract and cued items was flipped. Furthermore, the abstract interest group item refers to harms to the public welfare, whereas the cued item asks whether the influence of interest groups should be limited. Although these differences are not ideal, and results for the interest group item, in particular, should be interpreted with caution, these variations should lead to an underestimation rather than an overestimation of the effects.

cation, standard controls such as sociodemographic characteristics or the extremity of ideological positions are not relevant here, as they influence abstract as well as contextualized support (e.g., Kingzette et al. 2021; Kokkonen and Linde 2023).<sup>2,3</sup> Our main explanatory variables are respondents' predispositions on climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, which we expected to influence people's contextualized but not their abstract norm support. To test the robustness of the results, we additionally estimated the influence of people's issue positions on the difference between their abstract and contextualized support (Online Appendix 5), again with substantively unchanged results.

## 4 Results

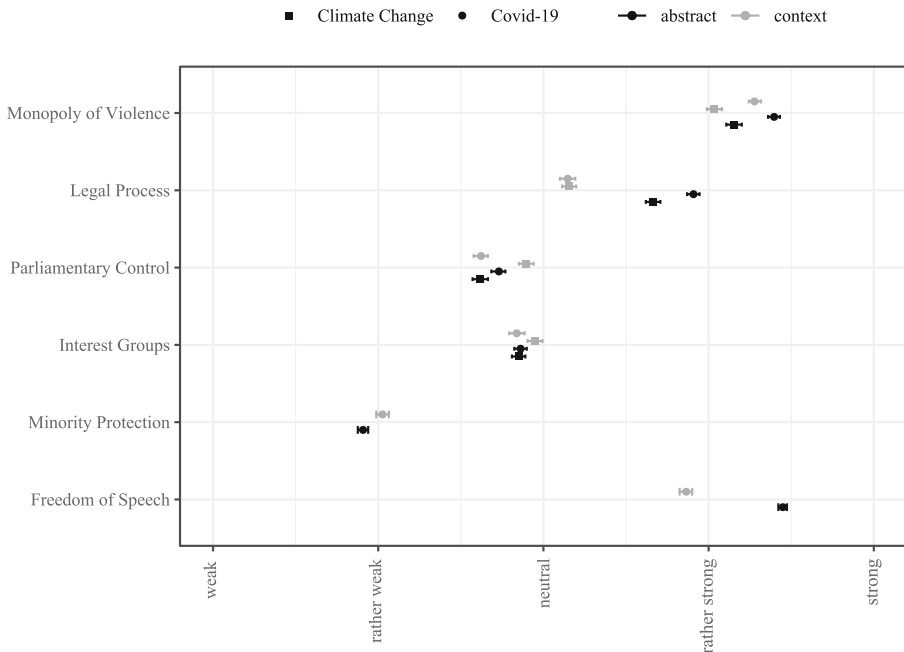
To confirm that people's abstract support for liberal and democratic norms differs from their contextualized support for these norms, we first considered the mean support for norms with and without trade-off-specific cues. Figure 2 depicts respondents' average norm support in the abstract and in the context of climate change (squares) or the COVID-19 pandemic (circles). On average, respondents are more willing to limit legal recourse and curtail the freedom of speech when trade-off-specific cues imply that upholding these norms would adversely affect the agenda pursued by the majority of the respondents in the sample. Although the difference is considerably smaller, respondents are even significantly more accepting of political violence in the fight against climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating that the most fundamental cornerstones of liberal democratic rule are questioned when they impede people's political agendas.

The picture is less clear for parliamentary oversight, as the difference just reaches statistical significance in the expected direction for the COVID-19 pandemic but is reversed for climate change. Similarly, support for the influence of interest groups remains unaffected in both scenarios. Yet respondents are more supportive of protecting the interests of individuals over general public interests in the context of COVID-19. In line with our larger argument, norms benefitting minorities or the opposition, which comprise their own trade-off-specific cues, received comparatively low support even in the abstract. In contrast, norms generally benefitting all citizens—namely freedom of speech, the legal process, and the monopoly of violence—received higher levels of abstract support. Adding trade-off-specific cues then produced the greatest effects for the latter, i.e., for norms without inherent positional information. In short, citizens' support for liberal and democratic norms appears to vary depending on how norms impact their political agendas.

We tested the hypothesis that individuals' contextualized support for liberal and democratic norms is influenced by their issue positions using linear regression mod-

<sup>2</sup> To preclude the possibility that respondents' issue positions merely reflected their party identification or ideological extremity (cf. Graham and Svobik 2020), we reran the models with controls (Online Appendix 4), with substantively unchanged results.

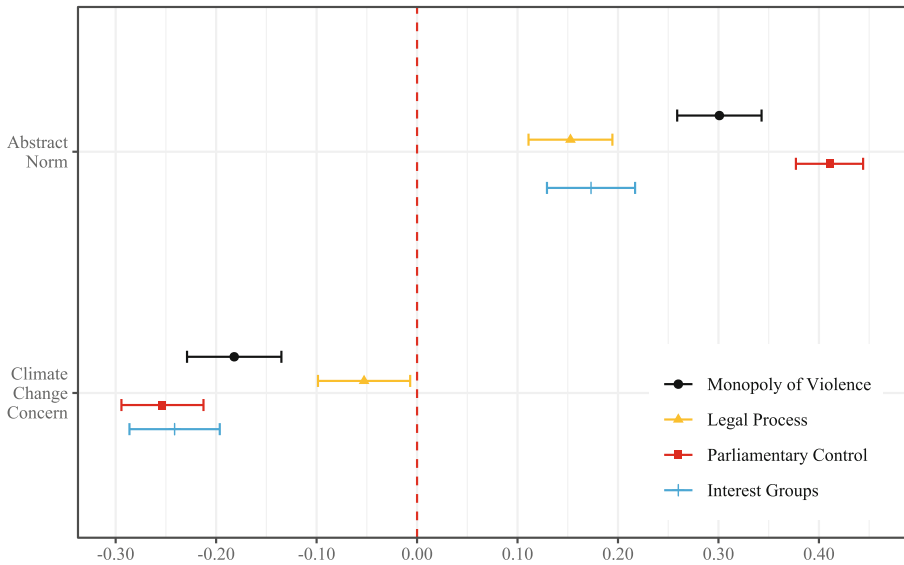
<sup>3</sup> Ideology was not queried separately in the climate change dataset; therefore, ideology could only be controlled for via party identification in these models.



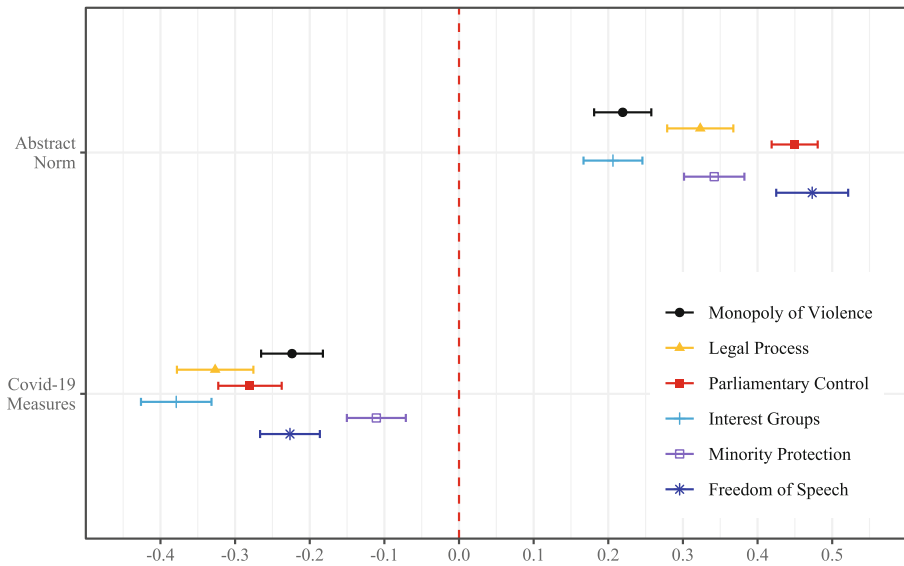
**Fig. 2** Average support for liberal and democratic norms by issue. Depicted are mean levels of abstract (black) and contextualized (gray) support with 95% confidence intervals. Issues are climate change (squares) and the COVID-19 pandemic (circles). Source: Survey 1 for climate change, survey 2 for the COVID-19 pandemic

els explaining respondents' contextualized norm support as a function of their abstract support and their positions on climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 3 shows that, while abstract support is positively related to contextualized support, this link is surprisingly weak considering that the measures queried the same concept, only adding trade-off-specific cues. In line with the descriptive findings, respondents who are very concerned about climate change are willing to compromise all considered liberal and democratic principles to advance climate protection. Accordingly, concerned respondents' contextualized support is between five (legal process) and 25 (parliamentary control) percentage points lower than their abstract support, strengthening the notion that abstract and contextualized support differ systematically and substantively.

Abstract norm support is linked slightly more strongly to contextualized support queried against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic (Fig. 4), although the effects remain small given the inherent link between the two measures. Respondents who take the maximum number of COVID-19 prevention measures are less supportive of six out of seven principles, expressing between 11 (minority protection) and 38 (interest groups) percentage points less contextualized norm support compared to respondents who take no prevention measures.



**Fig. 3** Effects on support for liberal and democratic norms in the context of climate change. Depicted are linear coefficients with 95% confidence intervals (see climate change models in Online Appendix 2 for full regression results). Source: Survey 1



**Fig. 4** Effects on support for liberal and democratic norms in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Depicted are linear coefficients with 95% confidence intervals (see COVID-19 models in Online Appendix 2 for full regression results). Source: Survey 2

## 5 Conclusion

Using climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic as examples, this research was designed to study whether individuals' support for the application of liberal and democratic norms to specific issues differs from their abstract support for the same norms, as well as how these differences are informed by individuals' issue positions. We found that abstract norm support differs substantively from contextualized support and is stronger for principles that benefit all citizens, as opposed to clearly defined groups such as minorities. Specifically, we show that individuals' political incentives matter for their expressions of support when applied to climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Individuals who are more concerned about climate change are less willing to uphold liberal and democratic norms when they are in the way of climate protection; the same relationship can be observed for people taking more precautions against COVID-19 and upholding norms that impede action against the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings challenge the informative value of abstract norm support, as people are either unwilling or unable to translate their abstract support into principled decisions. Considering that the application of norms rather than abstract support is decisive for democratic (de)consolidation, these results are concerning.

Expanding the emerging literature on democratic support (e.g., Carey et al. 2022; Fossati et al. 2022; Graham and Svobik 2020; Lewandowsky and Jankowski 2023; Saikkonen and Christensen 2022), we demonstrate that political incentives not only prevent citizens from punishing norm violations by candidates and parties but also significantly lower their expressions of support for these norms. These effects can be read in different ways: People may have real preferences for regime principles, which are updated when learning about additional information and are thus subject to adaptive political evaluations. Alternatively, abstract norm support could be stable but not well elaborated, making it hard for people to consistently apply their abstract convictions in specific settings (Wuttke et al. 2023). The available evidence cannot tell us which reading more accurately describes reality, and both accounts may apply at least to some people.

Several starting points for future research arise from the limitations of the available data. Due to the framing of the survey questions, we could not test whether our assumptions also hold if we flip the target of the norm violation, i.e., if the norms were indicated to benefit the opposite group. Moreover, because norm support was queried only for one issue per survey, we cannot compare how trade-off-specific cues related to different political issues to influence the support for individual respondents. It would be especially relevant to compare the effect for individuals whose incentives are reversed for different issues. In addition, the wording of the abstract and contextualized items varied in some cases. Most important, the abstract interest group item suggested that these groups harm the public welfare, whereas the cued version did not reference harm, resulting in a slightly different connotation. Although the direction of these differences suggests that we underestimated the real effects, we cannot preclude that deviations in question wording influenced some results. Lastly, newly collected surveys should measure respondents' own percep-

tions regarding their membership in the majority or minority to allow for more fine-grained analyses of opportunity structures.

**Supplementary Information** The online version of this article (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-024-00540-3>) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

**Conflict of interest** L. Isermann, L. Gärtner, and H. Schoen declare that they have no competing interests.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Amat, Francesc, Albert Falcó-Gimeno, Andreu Arenas, and Jordi Muñoz. 2020. *Pandemics meet democracy: Experimental evidence from the COVID-19 crisis in Spain*. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io>.
- Arbatli, Ekim, and Dina Rosenberg. 2021. United we stand, divided we rule: how political polarization erodes democracy. *Democratization* 28(2):285–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1818068>.
- Arceneaux, Kevin, Bert N. Bakker, Sara B. Hobolt, and Catherine E. De Vries. 2020. Is COVID-19 a threat to liberal democracy? <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/8e4pa>.
- Armington, Klaus, and Reto Bürgisser. 2021. Trade-offs between redistribution and environmental protection: the role of information, ideology, and self-interest. *Journal of European Public Policy* 28(4):489–509. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1749715>.
- Ballard-Rosa, Cameron, A. Malik Mashail, Stephanie J. Rickard, and Kenneth Scheve. 2021. The economic origins of authoritarian values: evidence from local trade shocks in the United Kingdom. *Comparative Political Studies* 54(13):2321–2353. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140211024296>.
- Ballard-Rosa, Cameron, Amalie Jensen, and Kenneth Scheve. 2022. Economic decline, social identity, and authoritarian values in the United States. *International Studies Quarterly* <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqab027>.
- Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy* 27(1):5–19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>.
- Binderkrantz, Anne Skorkjær. 2020. Interest groups: a democratic necessity and a necessary evil. In *The oxford handbook of Danish politics*, ed. Peter Munk Christiansen, Jørgen Elklit, and Peter Nedergaard, 432–449. Oxford University Press.
- van der Brug, Wouter, Sebastian Popa, Sara B. Hobolt, and Hermann Schmitt. 2021. Democratic support, populism, and the incumbency effect. *Journal of Democracy* 32(4):131–145. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0057>.
- Bundesministerium für Gesundheit. 2023. Coronavirus-Pandemie: Was geschah wann? [bundesgesundheitsministerium.de](https://www.bundesgesundheitsministerium.de/coronavirus/chronik-coronavirus). <https://www.bundesgesundheitsministerium.de/coronavirus/chronik-coronavirus>. Accessed 14 Dec 2023.
- Carey, John, Katherine Clayton, Gretchen Helmke, Brendan Nyhan, Mitchell Sanders, and Susan Stokes. 2022. Who will defend democracy? Evaluating tradeoffs in candidate support among partisan donors and voters. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 32(1):230–245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2020.1790577>.
- Coppedge, Michael. 2017. Eroding regimes: what, where, and when? *V-Dem Working Paper* <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3066677>.

- Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, Agnes Cornell, M. Steven Fish, Lisa Gastaldi, Haakon Gjerløw, Adam Glynn, Ana Good God, Sandra Grahn, Allen Hicken, Katrin Kinzelbach, Joshua Krusell, Kyle L. Marquardt, Kelly McMann, Valeriya Mechkova, Juraj Medzihorsky, Natalia Natsika, Anja Neundorff, Pamela Paxton, Daniel Pemstein, Josefine Pernes, Oskar Rydén, Johannes von Römer, Brigitte Seim, Rachel Sigman, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jeffrey Staton, Aksel Sundström, Eitan Tzelgov, Wang Yi-ting, Tore Wig, Steven Wilson, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2023. V-Dem Dataset v13. [https://doi.org/10.23696/VDEM\\_DS23](https://doi.org/10.23696/VDEM_DS23).
- Diamond, Larry. 2020. Breaking out of the democratic slump. *Journal of Democracy* 31(1):36–50. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0003>.
- Easton, David. 1965. *A systems analysis of political life*. New York: John Wiley.
- Easton, David. 1975. A re-assessment of the concept of political support. *British Journal of Political Science* 5(4):435–457. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400008309>.
- Eckstein, David, Vera Künzel, and Laura Schäfer. 2021. Global climate risk index 2021: who suffers most from extreme weather events? Weather-related loss events in 2019 and 2000 to 2019 16th ed. <https://www.germanwatch.org/en/19777>.
- Engler, Sarah, Palmo Brunner, Romane Loviat, Tarik Abou-Chadi, Lucas Leemann, Andreas Glaser, and Daniel Kübler. 2021. Democracy in times of the pandemic: explaining the variation of COVID-19 policies across European democracies. *West European Politics* 44(5–6):1077–1102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1900669>.
- European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure. 2023. *ESS10—integrated file, edition 3.2*. [https://doi.org/10.21338/ESS10E03\\_2](https://doi.org/10.21338/ESS10E03_2).
- Flynn, Cassie, Eri Yamasumi, Stephen Fisher, Dan Snow, Zack Grant, Martha Kirby, Peter Browning, Moritz Rommerskirchen, and Inigo Russell. 2021. *The peoples' climate vote*. UNDP.
- Foa, Roberto Stefan, and Yascha Mounk. 2016. The democratic disconnect. *Journal of Democracy* 27(3):5–17. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0049>.
- Fossati, Diego, Burhanuddin Muhtadi, and Eve Warburton. 2022. Why democrats abandon democracy: Evidence from four survey experiments. *Party Politics* 28(3):554–566. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068821992488>.
- Freedom House. 2023. Freedom in the world 2023: marking 50 years in the struggle for democracy. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2023/marking-50-years>.
- Graham, Matthew H., and Milan W. Svobik. 2020. Democracy in america? Partisanship, polarization, and the robustness of support for democracy in the United States. *American Political Science Review* 114(2):392–409. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000052>.
- Graham, Jesse, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian A. Nosek. 2009. Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96(5):1029–1046. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015141>.
- Hernández, Enrique. 2016. Europeans' views of democracy. In *How europeans view and evaluate democracy*, ed. Mónica Ferrín, Hanspeter Kriesi, 43–63. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198766902.003.0003>.
- Hippert, Julia, and Philipp Saul. 2021. Von Stuttgart bis auf die Treppen des Reichstagsgebäudes. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/querdenken-chronologie-bundestag-1.5279496>. Accessed 14 Dec 2023.
- Howe, Paul. 2017. Eroding norms and democratic deconsolidation. *Journal of Democracy* 28(4):15–29. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2017.0061>.
- Huq, Aziz, and Tom Ginsburg. 2018. How to lose a constitutional democracy. *UCLA Law Review* 65(1):78–169. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2901776>.
- Inglehart, Ronald F. 2003. How solid is mass support for democracy : and how can we measure it? *Political Science and Politics* 36(1):51–57. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096503001689>.
- Keele, Luke, and Nathan J. Kelly. 2006. Dynamic models for dynamic theories: the ins and outs of lagged dependent variables. *Political Analysis* 14(2):186–205. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpj006>.
- Kingzette, Jon, James N. Druckman, Samara Klar, Yanna Krupnikov, Matthew Levendusky, and John Barry Ryan. 2021. How affective polarization undermines support for democratic norms. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 85(2):663–677. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab029>.
- Kokkonen, Andrej, and Jonas Linde. 2023. A nativist divide? Anti-immigration attitudes and diffuse support for democracy in Western Europe. *European Journal of Political Research* 62(3):977–988. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12551>.
- Krishnarajan, Suthan. 2023. Rationalizing democracy: the perceptual bias and (un)democratic behavior. *American Political Science Review* 117(2):474–496. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000806>.

- Landwehr, Claudia, and Philipp Harms. 2020. Preferences for referenda: intrinsic or instrumental? Evidence from a survey experiment. *Political Studies* 68(4):875–894. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719879619>.
- Landwehr, Claudia, Thorsten Faas, and Philipp Harms. 2017. Bröckelt der Verfahrenskonsens? Einstellungen zu politischen Entscheidungen und demokratischen Entscheidungsverfahren in Zeiten des Populismus. *Leviathan* 45(1):35–54. <https://doi.org/10.5771/0340-0425-2017-1-35>.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How democracies die*. New York: Crown.
- Lewandowsky, Marcel, and Michael Jankowski. 2023. Sympathy for the devil? Voter support for illiberal politicians. *European Political Science Review* 15(1):39–56. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S175577392200042X>.
- Lührmann, Anna, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2019. A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it? *Democratization* 26(7):1095–1113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029>.
- Luo, Zhaotian, and Adam Przeworski. 2022. Democracy and its vulnerabilities: dynamics of democratic backsliding. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3469373>.
- Maeda, Ko. 2010. Two modes of democratic breakdown: a competing risks analysis of democratic durability. *The Journal of Politics* 72(4):1129–1143. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381610000575>.
- Marbach, Moritz, Ward Dalston, and Dominik Hangartner. 2021. Do COVID-19 Lockdown policies weaken civic attitudes? Survey evidence from the United States and europe. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/5nsgc>.
- Mittiga, Ross. 2021. Political legitimacy, authoritarianism, and climate change. *American Political Science Review* <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001301>.
- Navarrete, Rosa M., Christina Eder, Marc Debus, Harald Schoen, Chan Chung-hong, and Christof Wolf. 2022. *digilog@bw—Dynamics of Participation in the Era of Digitalisation*.
- Norris, Pippa. 2011. *Democratic deficit: critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pemstein, Daniel, Kyle L. Marquardt, Eitan Tzelgov, Wang Yi-ting, Juraj Medzihorsky, Joshua Krusell, Farhad Miri, and Johannes von Römer. 2023. *The V-Dem measurement model: latent variable analysis for cross-national and cross-temporal expert-coded data*, 8th edn. University of Gothenburg Varieties of Democracy Institute.
- Quintelier, Ellen, and Jan W. Van Deth. 2014. Supporting democracy: Political participation and political attitudes. Exploring causality using panel data. *Political Studies* 62(S1):153–171. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12097>.
- Saikkonen, Inga, and Henrik Serup Christensen. 2022. Guardians of democracy or passive bystanders? A conjoint experiment on elite transgressions of democratic norms. *Political Research Quarterly* <https://doi.org/10.1177/10659129211073592>.
- Schlozman, Kay L., Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady. 2012. *The unheavenly chorus: unequal political voice and the broken promise of American democracy*. Princeton Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Sommer, Moritz, and Sebastian Haunss. 2020. Fridays for Future: Eine Erfolgsgeschichte vor neuen Herausforderungen. In *Fridays for Future – Die Jugend gegen den Klimawandel*, ed. Moritz Sommer, Sebastian Haunss, 237–252. Bielefeld: transcript. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453476>.
- Statista. 2019. Jahresrückblick 2019: Statista Dossierplus zu den Ereignissen im Jahr 2019. <https://de.statista.com/statistik/studie/id/67171/dokument/jahresueckblick-2019/>.
- Steiner, Nils D., and Claudia Landwehr. 2023. Learning the Brexit lesson? Shifting support for direct democracy in Germany in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. *British Journal of Political Science* 53(2):757–765. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123422000382>.
- Svolik, Milan W. 2019. Polarization versus democracy. *Journal of Democracy* 30(3):20–32. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0039>.
- Svolik, Milan W. 2020. When polarization trumps civic virtue: partisan conflict and the subversion of democracy by incumbents. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 15(1):3–31. <https://doi.org/10.1561/100.00018132>.
- Thackeray, Stephen J., Sharon A. Robinson, Pete Smith, Rhea Bruno, Miko U.F. Kirschbaum, Carl Bernacchi, Maria Byrne, William Cheung, M. Francesca Cotrufo, Phillip Gienapp, Sue Hartley, Ivan Janssens, T. Jones Hefin, Kazuhiko Kobayashi, Luo Yiqi, Josep Penuelas, Rowan Sage, David J. Suggett, Danielle Way, and Steve Long. 2020. Civil disobedience movements such as School Strike for the Climate are raising public awareness of the climate change emergency. *Global Change Biology* 26(3):1042–1044. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gcb.14978>.
- Umweltbundesamt. 2020. *Umweltbewusstsein in Deutschland 2020: Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Bevölkerungsumfrage*. Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz, nukleare Sicherheit



- und Verbraucherschutz (BMUV). [https://www.bmu.de/fileadmin/Daten\\_BMU/Pools/Broschueren/umweltbewusstsein\\_2020\\_bf.pdf](https://www.bmu.de/fileadmin/Daten_BMU/Pools/Broschueren/umweltbewusstsein_2020_bf.pdf).
- Wagschal, Uwe, Sebastian Jäckle, Achim Hildebrandt, and Eva-Maria Trüdinger. 2020. *Ausgewählte Ergebnisse der zweiten Welle einer Bevölkerungsumfrage zu den Auswirkungen des Corona-Virus: November 2020*. Politikpanel Deutschland.
- Werner, Hannah. 2020. If I'll win it, I want it: the role of instrumental considerations in explaining public support for referendums. *European Journal of Political Research* 59(2):312–330. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12358>.
- Wuttke, Alexander, Konstantin Gavras, and Harald Schoen. 2020. Leader of the free world or pioneer in democracy's decline? Examining the democratic deconsolidation hypothesis on the mass level in East and West Germany. *Research & Politics* <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168019900822>.
- Wuttke, Alexander, Christian Schimpf, and Harald Schoen. 2023. Populist citizens in four European countries: widespread dissatisfaction goes with contradictory but pro-democratic regime preferences. *Swiss Political Science Review* 29(2):246–257. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12548>.
- Zaller, John R. 1992. *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zaller, John, and Stanley Feldman. 1992. A simple theory of the survey response: answering questions versus revealing preferences. *American Journal of Political Science* 36(3):579. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111583>.
- Zilinsky, Jan. 2019. Democratic deconsolidation revisited: Young Europeans are not dissatisfied with democracy. *Research & Politics* 6(1):2–9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168018814332>.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.