

Do citizens care more about deliberative values than electoral democracy? An analysis of public attitudes to democratic norm violations in four countries.

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Abstract

Democratic scholarship maintains a consensus that rhetoric targeted at undermining free and fair elections is more threatening to democracy than transgressions of deliberative values. However, whether citizens democratic alarm systems are wired this way remains empirically untested. We explore this question using a preregistered survey experiment with 5,303 respondents across the US, England, Germany, and Italy. Our central finding is that citizens are significantly more disapproving of deliberative norm violations than of threats to the core institutions of electoral democracy. Our findings are consistent across countries and experimental variations in actor-contexts, where we test citizens' attitudes to norm violations by three distinct actors: candidates, legislators, and journalists. Exploring our findings by the attitudinal profile of respondents, we find that those with more populist attitudes are more likely to be tolerant of electoral democracy violations and intolerant of deliberative violations. These results have significant implications for understanding public resistance to democratic backsliding.

Keywords: Electoral Democracy - Deliberative Democracy - Norm Violations - Democratic Backsliding - Adversarial Ethics - Survey Experiment

Introduction

There is a consensus in democratic scholarship that threats to the norms underpinning free and fair elections are more serious than violations of deliberative norms. For example, rhetoric that is uncivil or fails to take alternative perspectives into account are widely regarded to be less threatening to the fabric of democracy than rhetoric that seeks to undermine the legitimacy of election results or the freedom of the press. This consensus has been explicitly defended in theory (Bagg and Tranvik 2019; Coppedge et al. 2020; Posner 2009; Shapiro 2009), but it is also expressed clearly by the normative choices of empirical researchers working on public tolerance for democratic backsliding, who almost exclusively focus on citizens' attitudes to violations of norms pertaining to electoral democracy (or related principles like the rule of law, for example) (Frederiksen 2024; Wunsch and Gessler 2023; Christensen and Saikkonen 2025).

Despite the academic consensus, there has been no empirical research on whether citizens may be in agreement with it. Our central goal in this paper is to understand whether - and the conditions under which - citizens' democratic alarm systems are wired in the way that this normative consensus prescribes, namely by being more intolerant of norm violations that target the institutions of electoral democracy than those that erode the quality of deliberation. Citizens attitudes to democratic norm transgressions are an important bulwark against democratic erosion, with political actors more likely to abide by democratic norms when transgressions of these norms would fall afoul of public sentiment (Graham and Svobik 2020). By directly comparing the conditions under which citizens are more or less tolerant of deliberative and electoral norm violations, we aim to cast light on an under-explored dimension of citizens' attitudes to democratic erosion. This in turn will allow us to better assess some of the strengths and vulnerabilities of citizens democratic alarm systems.

There are good reasons to expect that citizens' evaluations of norm violations will vary depending on the context in which they are being violated. This is because proximity to adversarial politics may relax the normative parameters of acceptable political rhetoric (Bagg and Tranvik 2019; Applbaum 2000; Mansbridge et al. 2012). Effectively, norm violations may be evaluated less negatively in more adversarial political contexts, where the nature of intensive competition may make it easier for citizens to tolerate violations as something that is simply required in that context. Despite the potentially important role of context in shaping perceptions of norm violations, existing studies tend to focus on citizen perceptions of norm transgressions by politicians or parties during election campaigns, despite being these the archetype of adversarial politics (e.g., Carey et al. 2022; Frederiksen 2024; Graham and Svulik 2020). As a result, we know little about how variation in the adversarial intensity of actor-contexts may affect perceptions of norm transgressions. We thus aim to determine the extent to which citizens' attitudes to electoral and deliberative norm violations remain stable across more and less adversarial contexts.

Furthermore, we expect citizens' perceptions of deliberative and electoral norm violations to be shaped by their own democratic attitudinal profile. Indeed, existing studies on norm violations have already demonstrated that more populist and radical right voters are more tolerant of institutional norm transgressions pertaining to electoral and liberal democracy (e.g. Lewandowsky and Jankowski 2023). We build on this literature by a) extending the analysis to a comparison with deliberative norm violations and b) examining whether recently validated attitudinal distinctions between populist (anti-politics, people-centric), technocratic (anti-politics, expert-centric), and party-democratic (pro-politics, party-centric) attitudes (Bertsou and Caramani 2022) can help to explain variation in responses to norm violations, both electoral and deliberative.

To test our expectations, we ran a preregistered survey experiment in January 2025 using YouGov¹. This experiment was conducted on 5,303 respondents across four countries (the US, England, Germany, and Italy), where these four countries are broadly representative of advanced industrialised democracies in terms of the diversity of electoral and media systems and the extent to which electoral and deliberative norms may be under threat. The survey asked respondents about their attitudes concerning the justifiability and frequency of three deliberative norms (truthfulness, civility, and discursive inclusion) and two electoral democracy norms (loser's consent and press freedom). Importantly, to assess the effect of adversarial contexts, we randomly varied what context the respondent was allocated for each norm, where the three contexts were a candidate in an election campaign, a legislator speaking in the lower house, and a journalist in the legacy media.

We find that citizens' attitudes towards democratic norm violations run against the normative consensus in democratic scholarship because they are unambiguously more disapproving of deliberative norm violations than they are of norm transgressions pertaining to electoral democracy. Furthermore, perceptions of norm violations are significantly influenced by the context in which these violations occur. More specifically, contradicting the view that normative standards may be relaxed for more adversarial contexts, we find that those actors who are in fact most proximate to adversarial politics (e.g., candidates in an election campaign) are viewed as least justifiable in violating democratic norms. Finally, we find that perceptions of norm violations are substantially influenced by how populist the respondent is. While the extent to which citizens have party-based or technocrat attitudes exerts a significant effect on attitudes to electoral and deliberative norm violations in separate models, neither of these

¹ Please find our anonymous preregistration at https://osf.io/ws9gd/overview?view_only=4bb6e91b1c564a0696dec8a5dc873e90

attitudinal profiles independently predict attitudes to democratic norm violations when they are combined in a full model that includes populist attitudes.

Importantly, to explore whether our results reflect deeply-rooted attitudes or are contingent on the design of our survey, we conduct two tests. Firstly, we present all respondents with a non-elite context, asking them how justifiable and common it is for ordinary citizens to violate each norm. We find that those who see a norm violation as less justifiable in a citizen context also tend to see it as less justifiable in an elite context – despite clear variation in attitudes among the three elite contexts. Secondly, we show that respondents' evaluations of norm violations are not simply a reflection of how common these violations are perceived to be, but that the two are largely independent. Thus, in the face of violations that are perceived to be more frequent, there is neither a normalisation effect (softening citizens' reactions to norm violations) nor a backlash effect (hardening citizens' normative reactions to norm violations).

Some of our findings may initially appear pessimistic, suggesting that there are significant vulnerabilities to citizens democratic alarm systems when it comes to protecting the basic institutions of electoral democracy. However, when we consider that democratic backsliding begins as an anti-pluralist movement defined by rhetoric that includes the erosion of both deliberative and electoral democracy (Lührmann 2021), our findings suggest that there is still substantial democratic value in how citizens democratic alarm systems are wired, even if it does not align with the academic normative consensus.

A Framework for Evaluating Norm Violations

In this article, we examine whether citizens' attitudes to norm violations depend on the type of norm being violated (electoral democratic or deliberative); the adversarial intensity of the context in which the violation occurs (election campaign, legislature or legacy media); the respondent's own attitudinal profile (populist, technocratic or party-democratic attitudes) and the respondent's perception of how frequently specific norms are violated. In this section, we develop our hypotheses and explain how our investigation seeks to advance the existing literature on democratic norm violations.

Two kinds of norm violation: Electoral and deliberative

In setting out the conceptual framework of the Varieties of Democracy dataset (V-Dem), Coppedge et al. (2020, 29) claim that attributes associated with deliberation (like 'respectful, open-minded discussions') are less normatively salient than the attributes associated with electoral democracy, such as competitive elections, freedom of expression, and alternative information guaranteed by a free press. The argument underpinning this perspective is simple, but powerful: while problematic speech can always be countered by alternative speech under the security of institutions that deliver free and fair elections, the erosion or loss of the norms that allow these institutions to perform their democratic functions stifles democratic speech itself, whatever its quality. A logical extension of this view is that different forms of undemocratic speech pose different levels of threat to democracy. For example, speech that attempts to undermine the existence of free and fair elections is more problematic than speech that undermines the deliberative quality of public debate.

It may be argued that this view does not align with deliberative democracy. Indeed, deliberative democrats insist that deliberation does not require electoral institutions (Dryzek et al. 2019). Not only can deliberation in its own right be a major catalyst through which electoral institutions are established or restored (Dryzek 2009), there may be other institutional

arrangements (like sortition, where citizens are randomly selected to legislate) that could do a better job than elections in realising a deliberative democracy (Landemore 2026). Notwithstanding these caveats, deliberative democrats tend to align with the consensus on the normative priority of institutions of electoral democracy in the delimited context of representative democracies, precisely because of the role that they play in facilitating deliberation in those contexts. For example, freedom of the press is a necessary condition for the possibility of democratic deliberation, just as it is a condition for free and fair elections (Gutmann and Thompson 2004). Furthermore, to the extent that political representatives are leaders in any deliberative process leading to public policy, it is necessary that the mechanism by which they are selected is widely accepted as legitimate if the processes of deliberation in which they participate are to be seen as legitimate (Manin 1987). Of course, an electoral process that poorly expresses deliberative values may diminish the legitimacy of the outcome and thus contribute to the erosion of electoral democracy. However, this is not in itself grounds for refusing to accept the electoral result, but rather an invocation to improve deliberative quality.

While the priority of electoral democracy over deliberative values may be explicitly defended in theory (Bagg and Tranvik 2019; Coppedge et al. 2020; Posner 2009; Shapiro 2009), it is also evident in empirical work by the tendency of researchers to focus on citizens' attitudes to the violation of norms that ensure the continuation of free and fair elections. This empirical work includes research on the electoral democratic norms of electoral integrity (Frederiksen 2024) and media freedom (Christensen and Saikkonen 2025; Lewandowsky and Jankowski 2023), as well as adjacent institutional norms pertaining to judicial independence (Mazepus and Toshkov 2022; Saikkonen and Christensen 2023; Wunsch and Gessler 2023) and the independence of legislative power (Graham and Svolik 2020; Krishnarajan 2023). Overall, this research shows that citizens generally place high value on electoral democratic norms and see them as the most essential component of democracy (see also Hernández 2025),

even if they are willing to sacrifice these (Frederiksen 2024; Graham and Svulik 2020) or rationalise their violation (Krishnarajan 2023) when it comes at the cost of their partisan attachments or policy preferences.

Studies focusing on violations of discursive norms are rarer (though see Skytte 2021, 2022 on civility and Valgarðsson et al. 2024 on what they call ‘discursive integrity’), and we are not aware of any studies that compare attitudes to both electoral and deliberative norm violations. This lack of comparison means that existing research does not help us to understand whether citizens’ internal democratic alarm systems are wired in the way that democratic scholarship prescribes, so it is unclear whether citizens are more sensitive to deliberative or electoral norm violations. Considering the well-justified consensus in democratic scholarship, we hypothesise that:

- *Hypothesis 1: Respondents are more likely to view electoral democratic norm violations as less justifiable than deliberative norm violations.*

Violating norms across contexts

In ethics, there is a distinction between adversarial contexts (like a war or businesses in competition for the same customers) and cooperative contexts (like running a school or club), where adversarial contexts admit of a more flexible normativity, such that it may be permissive to breach certain norms of honesty and integrity to seek an advantage at the expense of opponents, as well as engage in forms of negative reciprocity or tit-for-tat hardball tactics (Heath 2007; Phillips and de Leon 2005). Thus, one’s evaluations of norm violations may depend on the adversarial nature of the context in which the violation occurs.

In the political sphere, the activities of running for office in an election and advancing a particular piece of legislation are distinct activities, with the former being more adversarial and the latter entailing a more cooperative enterprise. For this reason, a common view in

political science is that election campaigns are *reduced normative contexts*, where politicians are thought to (sometimes justifiably) lower their normative standards compared to the more cooperative legislative contexts because they are engaged in a unique zero-sum and high-stakes adversarial context that effectively puts them on a “war” footing with their rivals (Applbaum 2000; Bagg and Tranvik 2019; Mansbridge et al. 2012 - see also Beerbohm 2016 for a summary of this view). On this account, campaigns are mechanisms for leadership selection based on the art of mass manipulation (Schumpeter 2003, 283), where ‘political opponents expect to be slandered and voters expect to be deceived’ (Applbaum 2000, 4), and the goal can be as intense as the ‘total destruction’ (Gould 2011, 208) of political opponents at the ballot box in a ‘surrogate war’ (Gould 2011, 304), where it may be ‘necessary’ for opponents to ‘[refuse] to find common ground or look for ways to compromise’ (Mansbridge et al. 2012, 7).

This is not to say that legislative politics is cooperative only and without adversarial dimensions, but rather that there is a purity to the adversarial nature of campaigns that makes them an adversarial archetype in the political realm. Indeed, even the argument that we live in an era of the permanent campaign, such that everyday politics has come to reflect the heightened partisanship of a zero-sum battle (Mansbridge et al. 2012, 7; Needham 2005, 344), presumes an ideal normative separation between the intense adversarial politics of office-seeking in campaigns and the more cooperative nature of policy-seeking activities in the legislature.

However, if citizens’ attitudes to norm transgressions are sensitive to contextual changes between the office-seeking and policy-seeking role of politicians, they should also have different normative expectations for actors who are further removed from direct involvement in adversarial politics. Journalistic norms in most media traditions, especially liberal ones like the UK and US (Hallin and Mancini 2004), tend to include a commitment to truth, impartiality, and a duty to hold power to account, which requires a certain critical distance

from partisan politics and its adversarial normative jeopardies (Hanitzsch et al. 2019; de Vreese et al. 2016). In other words, because they are not involved in zero-sum campaigns or legislative battles (that may have been infested by the logic of the permanent campaign), journalists do not confront the same kind of normative challenges and so may be expected to be less justifiable in violating democratic norms than politicians. Of course, journalists cannot be entirely removed from adversarial politics and in certain respects may be perceived as extensions of partisan battles, given the rise of partisan media in a more polarised political environment (Goot 2022; Groeling 2013, 148), with studies showing ideological homogeneity in newsrooms (Lichter 2017, 6) and perceived ideological bias in reporting (Hahn, Lee, and Lee 2016; Hansen and Kim 2011). However, just as there is an ideal separation between the adversarial nature of office-seeking and policy-seeking practices, there remains an even more stark distinction between the accountability and informational roles of journalists relative to the more competitive partisanship of politicians generally.

Existing experimental research tends to focus on how citizens perceive norm violations in election campaigns (Carey et al. 2022; Frederiksen 2024; Graham and Svulik 2020a; Wunsch, Jacob, and Derksen 2025), with one partial exception being a study by Suthan Krishnarajan (2023). The benefits of experimental research situated in the campaign context are clear, for example providing respondents with a familiar and realistic scenario in which they can be forced into choices between candidates with different attributes. However, if citizens do adopt a more permissive normativity in more intensely adversarial contexts, it may limit the generalisability of findings from these studies. It is therefore important to test the effect of contextual variation on citizens' attitudes to democratic norm violations, where the purpose of this manipulation is to determine whether respondents adopt the kind of normative attitudes that would be consistent with the theory that adversarial contexts involve relaxing normative standards. Thus we hypothesise that:

- *Hypothesis 2: The more distant an actor-context is from adversarial politics, the less justifiable respondents will perceive norm violations in that context to be (suggesting a normative priority where journalists are considered to be least justifiable in violating norms, followed by legislators and then candidates as the most justifiable).*

The role of attitudinal profile

Identifying the factors that influence citizens' attitudes to democratic norm violations is a crucial part of understanding the strengths and vulnerabilities of the public in resisting democratic erosion. We seek to test whether these attitudes are likely to be influenced by citizens' broader attitudinal profiles. Specifically, Bertsou and Caramani (2022: 6) have empirically validated the utility of the theoretical distinction between three democratic 'attitude profiles', defined as a cluster of attitudes indicating a particular way of thinking about the nature and purpose of democracy. These democratic profiles are: populist, technocratic, and party-democratic, each of which is defined by where they stand on their attitudes to elites, the value of expertise in politics, and the value of politicians and parties. For example, while more populist and technocratic citizens share a scepticism towards parties and politicians, they diverge in their attitudes to elites and expertise. By contrast, those who score more highly on party democracy tend to be most strongly supportive of the role of politicians and parties in democracy.

Existing studies have demonstrated that more populist citizens tend to tolerate (or even approve of) democratic norm violations (Donovan 2019; Lewandowsky and Jankowski 2023; Mudde 2007; Peffley and Rohrschneider 2024). In the present case, we may expect that the anti-pluralistic and anti-elite tendencies of more populist voters puts them in tension with important norms of both electoral and deliberative democracy. However, no study has

examined the extent to which more technocratic and party-centred citizens tolerate norm violations, and we have little indication from existing studies of whether the democratic profile of citizens makes a difference to whether they take norm violations targeted at electoral democracy more seriously than deliberative norm violations.

In theory, we may expect party democrats to be most likely to be intolerant of such transgressions, given that electoral institutions combined with deliberative norms provide the conditions under which parties at their best can thrive (Lipsitz 2004; White and Ypi 2016). While the anti-political tendencies of those with more technocratic profiles have led them to be associated with a more authoritarian approach to political decision-making (Urbinati 2014), the technocratic elevation of the value of expertise in politics also points towards a potentially heightened respect for fair procedures and deliberative norms to the extent that technocracy and deliberative democracy both operate in the ‘register of reason’ (Rummens 2024, 176). To test the effect of respondents’ democratic profiles on their relative tolerance for electoral and deliberative norm violations, we propose the following two hypotheses:

- *Hypothesis 3a: Across all actor-contexts, more populist respondents will believe that electoral and deliberative norm violations are more justifiable than other respondents;*
- *Hypothesis 3b: Across all actor-contexts, more a) technocratic or b) party-centred respondents will believe electoral and deliberative norm violations are less justifiable than other respondents.*

Testing the stability and independence of normative attitudes

To determine the extent to which citizens’ attitudes to norm violations are deep-rooted and coherent, rather than a mere function of anti-elite attitudes or other specificities of our experimental design, we conduct two tests. First, we examine whether respondents have consistent responses to norms across contexts relative to a baseline non-elite context where

citizens themselves are the perpetrators of norm infractions. Citizens have been shown to have coherent values across personal and political contexts (Kivikangas, Lönnqvist, and Ravaja 2017; Schwartz et al. 2014; Vecchione et al. 2013). Thus, if respondents feel strongly about a given norm violation in the citizen context, they should also feel strongly about it in whichever elite context they have been allocated for that norm. Inconsistency of attitudes from the personal to the political, by contrast, would be an indication that citizens' normative attitudes are being influenced by our experimental design and not reflective of their more deeply held values.

Second, we attempt to determine whether our results are due to underlying normative attitudes, or are a product of how common violations are perceived to transpire. On the one hand, a higher frequency of norm violations may lead to normalisation such that citizens no longer react very negatively to the norm violation (Kumlin and Esaiasson 2012; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). On the other hand, a higher frequency of norm violations could lead to more severe negative reactions born out of the frustration at their continued violation (Bertsou 2019; Harrison 2020). Testing whether citizens' reactions to norm violations are independent of their perceptions of the frequency of violations is particularly important given the nature of our experimental design. Because we distinguish between violations of electoral democracy and deliberative values, the former are likely to be perceived as less frequent than more generic violations of deliberative norms. For example, while there are many circumstances in which an actor may “bend the truth” or “discredit an opponent by insulting them” (deliberative violations), challenging the legitimacy of electoral results or the principle of a free press (electoral democracy violations) is a more circumstantially specific kind of norm violation. If respondents see one set of norm violations to be systematically more frequent, and if their attitudes to norm violations are significantly influenced by the perceived frequency of these violations, it would limit the conclusions it is possible to draw about differences in attitudes

they may have between violations of electoral democracy and deliberative norms. Existing studies on democratic norm violations do not run this test and so it is unclear whether frequency perceptions of norm violations need to be taken into account more broadly in experimental designs in this area.

Methodology

This paper is based on a preregistered experimental design embedded within a survey run by YouGov between 6th and 29th January 2025 in four countries: the US; England; Germany; and Italy. This survey was administered to 5,303 respondents and it included quotas on gender, age, and education level. Our cases are four consolidated democracies that exhibit considerable variation in their party and electoral systems, institutional structure, and degree of democratic erosion (as highlighted by pertinent V-Dem indicators, with Germany performing significantly better and the US much worse than the UK and Italy, both of which have also suffered notable democratic decline)². Taken together, these four cases are broadly representative of the institutional and party systems of Western democracies. Owing to this representativeness, our results can thus speak to a wider range of democratic systems.

Our experiment focuses on perceptions of both electoral democratic and deliberative norm violations. As **Table 1** below indicates, we focus on two norm violations targeted at key electoral democratic institutions (*loser's consent* and *press freedom*) and three violations directed at the quality of deliberation (*truthfulness*, *civility*, and *discursive inclusion*). While

² Searches of the V-Dem databases for all four countries were conducted under the variables 'Election losers accept results', 'Government censorship effort - Media', 'Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information' and 'Deliberative component index'. Searches were conducted at https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/

deliberative democracy is fundamentally about approximating a process of reason-giving between those who disagree (Gutmann and Thompson 2004), there is no one norm or value that constitutes “deliberation” as such, since it requires the expression of a broad set of values if it is to be realised (Steenbergen et al. 2003). Thus, we seek to test violations of norms that are widely considered to be necessary, though not sufficient, for deliberation.

Table 1: Democratic norm violations by type and how they undermine democracy

Norm-type	Norm	Violation	How violations undermine democracy
Electoral democracy norms	Loser’s consent	Calling into question the legitimacy of election results.	Weakens the conditions under which the public supports the legitimacy of electoral institutions.
	Press freedom	Advocating for restrictions on biased media outlets.	Weakens the conditions under which the public support the legitimacy of the media and the electoral requirements of freedom of expression and access to alternative information.
Deliberative norms	Truthfulness	Bending the truth on issues.	Weakens the conditions for deliberation by distorting the informational basis of political debate.
	Civility	Attempting to discredit those who disagree by insulting them.	Weakens the conditions for deliberation by undermining the culture of <i>respect</i> required for productive disagreement.
	Discursive inclusion	Ignoring the diverse concerns of those affected by decision-making.	Weakens the conditions for deliberation by undermining the culture of <i>recognition</i> required to hear and understand alternative perspectives.

For each of our five norms, respondents are randomly allocated a context and are then asked *how justifiable* violating that norm is in that context (a normative question) and *how common* violations are (a frequency question). To test the extent to which citizens’ attitudes to norm violations are sensitive to context, our design provides variation both in actors (politicians

vs. journalists) and political settings (campaign vs. legislature). Thus, we have three elite contexts: candidates in a campaign; legislators speaking in the lower house; and journalists in the legacy media. For each norm, respondents have an equal probability of being allocated any of the elite contexts, and each norm allocation is independent. For example, a respondent may be randomly allocated to the candidate context for the truthfulness questions, then randomly allocated journalists for the civility questions, and so on. We also randomise the order of the normative/frequency prompts for each respondent. Thus, half of respondents always see prompts about justifiability first, and half always see prompts about how common they perceive those transgressions to be first.

We present the norm-violator in a sympathetic light to the extent that they are violating a norm because they believe it is in the interests of the common good (and not to fulfill objectionably self-interested or partisan goals, for example). Furthermore, the norm violating behavior is not presented as absolute or systematic but occasional. For example, we do not ask about lying but “bending the truth” and we ask whether this is “sometimes” justifiable. In these ways we create a permissive environment for respondents to endorse norm infractions, thus mitigating the problem of desirability bias whereby respondents will err towards giving answers they think are socially desirable rather than what they really think. To test perceptions of the frequency of norm violations, we simply ask how common we think a particular kind of behaviour is within a given actor-context.

In addition to this experimental battery, we ask *all* respondents about the extent to which it is justifiable for ordinary citizens to violate these norms and the degree to which they do so, thereby providing us with a non-elite context to act as a baseline. To provide comparability with the elite prompts in the experimental design, for the three deliberative norms we probe how respondents feel about citizens violating these norms in a conflictual context, namely when discussing a disagreement in their local area. We again divide this into

normative and frequency questions. For the two electoral democracy norms, we simply ask all respondents how justifiable it is for citizens of their country to sometimes violate that norm and how common it is for them to do so. As an example, **Table 2** below illustrates how the truthfulness prompts vary across our three elite contexts. The full battery of prompts can be found in Supplementary Materials B.

Table 2: Truthfulness Prompts

Context	Prompt
Candidate Context	Normative: Imagine that a candidate running for [<i>the lower house</i>] bends the truth on a particular issue. The candidate believes that this will help them win the election for the common good. To what extent do you think it can be justifiable for the candidate to sometimes bend the truth during the election campaign?
	Frequency: How common do you think it is for candidates to bend the truth in their election campaigns to the [<i>the lower house</i>]?
Legislator Context	Normative: Imagine that a [<i>representative</i>] speaking in [<i>the lower house</i>] bends the truth on a particular issue. The [<i>representative</i>] believes that this will help them bring through laws for the common good. To what extent do you think it can be justifiable for the [<i>representative</i>] to sometimes bend the truth when speaking in [<i>the lower house</i>]?
	Frequency: How common do you think it is for [<i>representatives</i>] to bend the truth when speaking in [<i>the lower house</i>]?
Journalist Context	Normative: Imagine that a journalist in the [<i>country</i>] media bends the truth on a particular issue. The journalist believes that this is in the interest of the common good. To what extent do you think it can be justifiable for the journalist to sometimes bend the truth in their articles or media appearances?
	Frequency: How common do you think it is for journalists to bend the truth in their articles or media appearances?

Across both the experimental and citizen batteries, the normative questions are measured on a seven-point scale, where 1 is not at all justifiable and 7 is very justifiable. The frequency questions are measured on a seven-point scale, where 1 is not at all common and 7 is very common. In our analyses, these responses are then *flipped*, such that higher values indicate that the normative attitudes and frequency perceptions are stronger for that respondent (as violations are less justifiable and less common, respectively).

In our dataset, the respondent is the unit of analysis. For our main hypotheses, we stack the dataset such that the unit of analysis becomes respondent*norm response. Thus, each response represents a single respondent's response to a single norm prompt. For example, there will be two observations for respondent 1's response to civility in the experiment - one for the normative prompt, one for the frequency prompt. In contrast, for our two additional checks (comparing responses across elite and citizen contexts, and testing if frequency responses affect normative attitudes) we used the original, unstacked dataset and thus kept the respondent as the unit of analysis. This is because these checks are interested in the variation across individual respondents, while our hypotheses focus on variation across norms, which is explained by either the type of norm (H1), the context (H2), or attitudinal profile (H3).

For H1, the dependent variable is the normative response, the explanatory variable is norm type (electoral or deliberative), and we control for context allocation and prompt order (i.e., did they see the normative or frequency questions first). For H2, we ran a model with normative response as the dependent variable, a series of dummy variables to capture the effect of context allocation (the candidate context acts as the reference category), and controls for prompt order and the norm they are responding to (loser's consent is the baseline norm).

For H3, we first ran three separate models to examine if the interaction between norm type (electoral or deliberative) and each attitudinal profile (populism, technocracy, and party-centredness) had an effect on normative responses. However, since these attitudinal profiles

are not mutually exclusive (e.g., Bickerton and Accetti 2021), we also run a model that includes all three interactions between norm type and attitudinal profile. Please see Supplementary Materials B for more details on how we measured the attitudinal variables. All H3 models control for context allocation (journalists are the baseline), prompt order, and several sociodemographic variables (age, gender, education, income, urban/rural, and left-right self-placement).

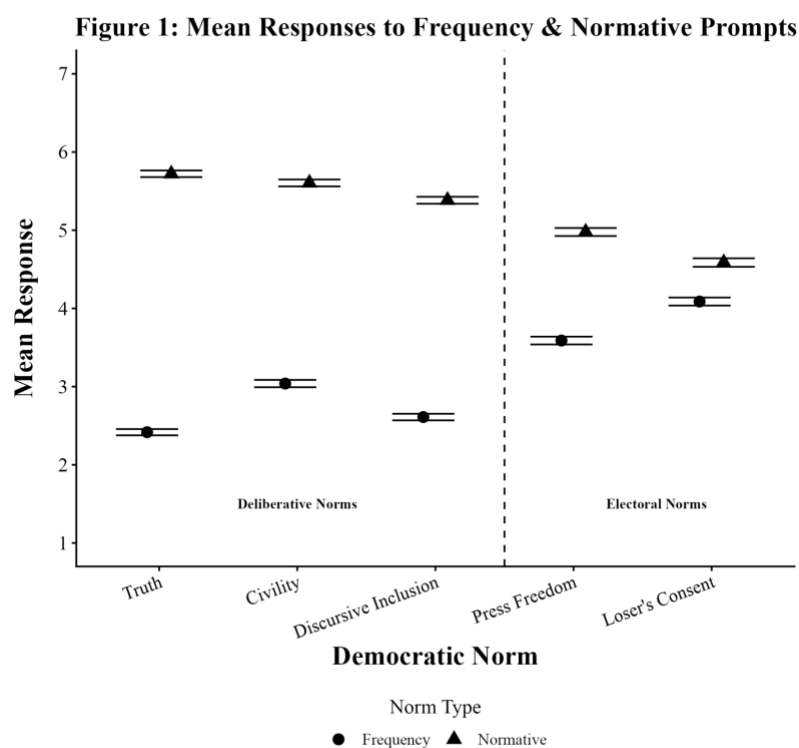
For the elite and citizen context comparison, we run five models (one for each norm), where the dependent variable is their normative response for that norm in the elite context, the explanatory variable is their normative response to that norm in the citizen context, and we control for which elite context they were allocated in the experiment for that norm. Finally, for examining the effect of frequency responses on normative ones, we run five models (one for each norm), where the dependent variable is the normative response to that norm and the explanatory variable is the frequency response to the same norm, while also controlling for which of the elite contexts the respondent was allocated for that norm. All our regression models use OLS with country fixed effects and respondent-clustered standard errors.

Results

In presenting our results, we begin with descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the mean normative and frequency responses across actor-contexts. Figure 1 below is a plot of our respondents' mean responses across all actor-contexts. Triangles represent normative responses and circles represent frequency responses, while each point also shows the 95% confidence interval. Deliberative prompts are on the left of the dotted line, while electoral norms are on the right. Figure 2 then disaggregates the mean elite responses by country, demonstrating that the response patterns are strikingly similar across all four country cases. This suggests that even more extreme cases of democratic erosion, such as in the US, are not

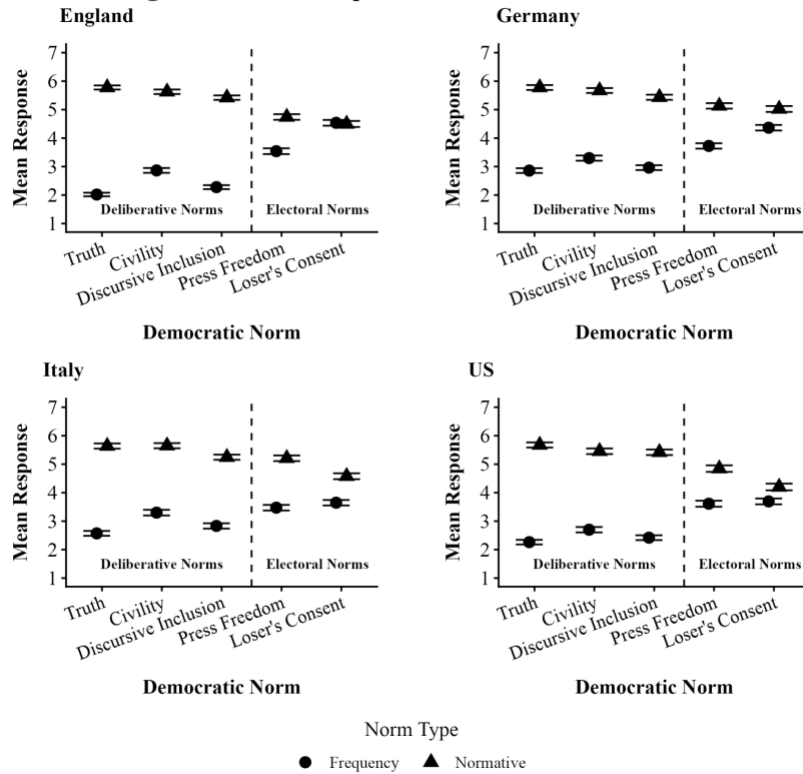
sufficient to significantly affect how citizens react to democratic norm violations or their perceptions of the frequency of these norm violations. This is true for both the norms of deliberative and electoral democracy that we test.

Nevertheless, both figures show that mean responses to frequency questions are nearly always lower than mean responses to normative questions. Thus, respondents view it as difficult to justify norm violations, but they think the violations of these norms are quite common among elite actors. When it comes to the electoral-deliberative distinction, we can see that deliberative norm violations tend to be viewed as less justifiable than electoral ones, but they are also seen to command less common adherence. Indeed, the gap between normative and frequency responses is markedly larger for deliberative norms compared to electoral democracy norms.



Note: Higher normative values indicate higher expectations that actors should comply with the norm. Higher frequency values indicate that actors are perceived to more frequently comply with the norm.

Figure 2: Mean Responses Across Four Countries



Note: Higher normative values indicate higher expectations that actors should comply with the norm.
Higher frequency values indicate that actors are perceived to more frequently comply with the norm.

Turning to our hypotheses, **Table 3** below shows the results of our regression analysis for Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 1 expected respondents to view violations of electoral democracy norms as less justifiable than violations of deliberative norms, but we find the stark opposite of what we expected. Thus, in direct tension with the normative consensus in democratic scholarship, respondents think that norm violations are significantly more justifiable if they relate to electoral democracy than if they relate to deliberative values.

Table 3: The Effect of Norm Type on Responses

Electoral Democratic Norms	-0.791** (0.022)
Legislator Allocation	-0.149** (0.026)
Journalist Allocation	-0.204** (0.027)
Prompt Order	-0.022 (0.031)
Num.Obs.	23892
R2	0.056
R2 Adj.	0.056
R2 Within	0.053
R2 Within Adj.	0.053
AIC	92258.8
BIC	92323.4
RMSE	1.67
FE: country	X

*p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

All models use OLS, country fixed effects, and respondent-clustered standard errors.

Next, Hypothesis 2 expected our respondents to view norm violations as less justifiable in contexts further removed from adversarial politics. To test this, we examined if responses differed depending on whether the respondent was allocated the candidate, legislator, or journalist context. Thus, our regression model in **Table 4** below includes two dummy variables for being allocated the legislator or journalist context, with the candidate context acting as the reference category. We find exactly the opposite set of relationships that were expected by Hypothesis 2. Rather than proximity to adversarial politics being a predictor of citizens applying more relaxed normative standards, the closer an actor is to adversarial politics the

more normatively demanding citizens are of them. Thus, respondents have significantly lower normative standards for both journalists and legislators, compared to the candidate reference category. However, the coefficients indicate that the substantive size of the differences across actor-contexts are not so great as to substantially moderate their overall reactions to norm violations or their perceived frequency. Thus, there seems to be an underlying stability in citizen attitudes, even if the precise context has a significant effect in nudging attitudes towards a lower tolerance for norm violations by those involved in more adversarial contexts.

This finding is visualised by **Figure 3** below, which plots the predicted mean normative responses associated with each context, along with the 95 percent confidence interval associated with each predicted mean. This Figure visualises the findings of our regression as it suggests that the predicted mean response is higher for the candidate context than either the legislator or journalist contexts. Thus, the slightly higher predicted mean for candidates suggests that our respondents have slightly higher normative expectations of those closest to adversarial politics.

Table 4: The Effect of Context Allocation on Normative Responses

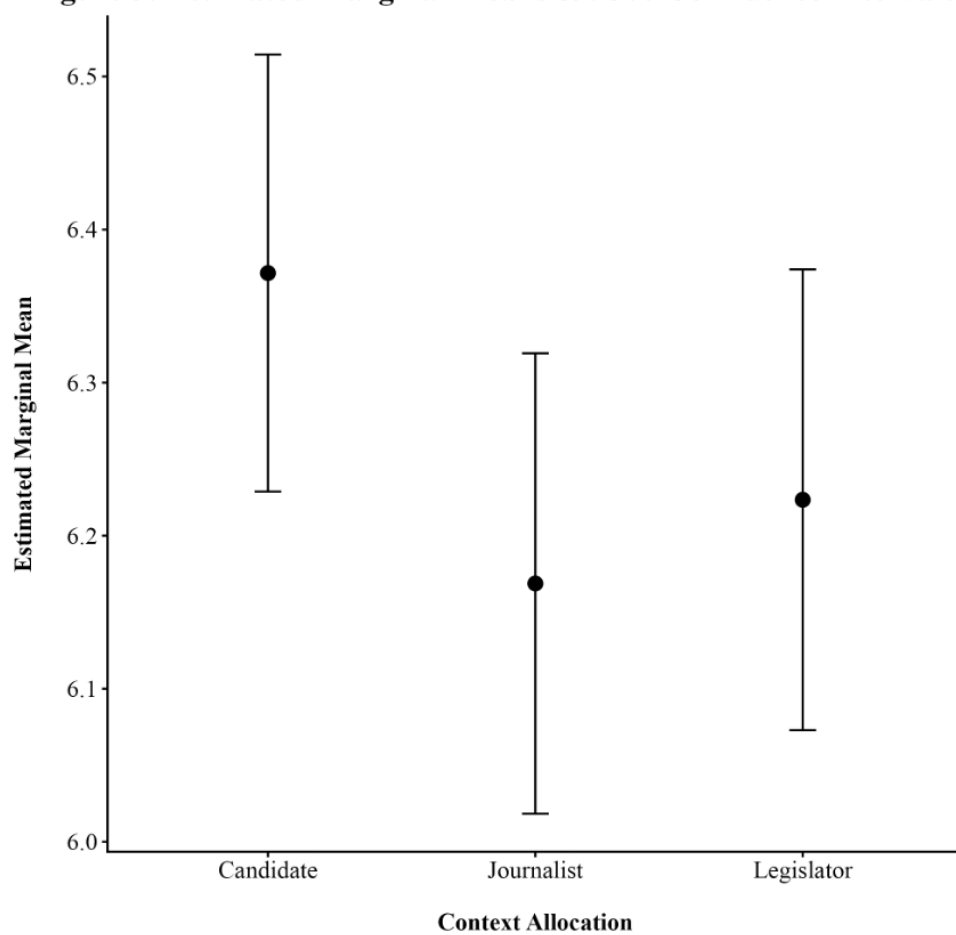
Journalist Allocation	-0.203** (0.027)
Legislator Allocation	-0.148** (0.026)
Truthfulness	1.137** (0.032)
Civility	1.018** (0.031)
Discursive Inclusion	0.799** (0.033)
Press Freedom	0.391** (0.033)
Prompt Order	-0.022 (0.031)
Num.Obs.	23892
R2	0.065
R2 Adj.	0.065
R2 Within	0.062
R2 Within Adj.	0.062

AIC	92034.7
BIC	92123.6
RMSE	1.66
FE: country	X

*p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

All models use OLS, country fixed effects,
and respondent-clustered standard errors.

Figure 3: Estimated Marginal Means & 95% Confidence Intervals



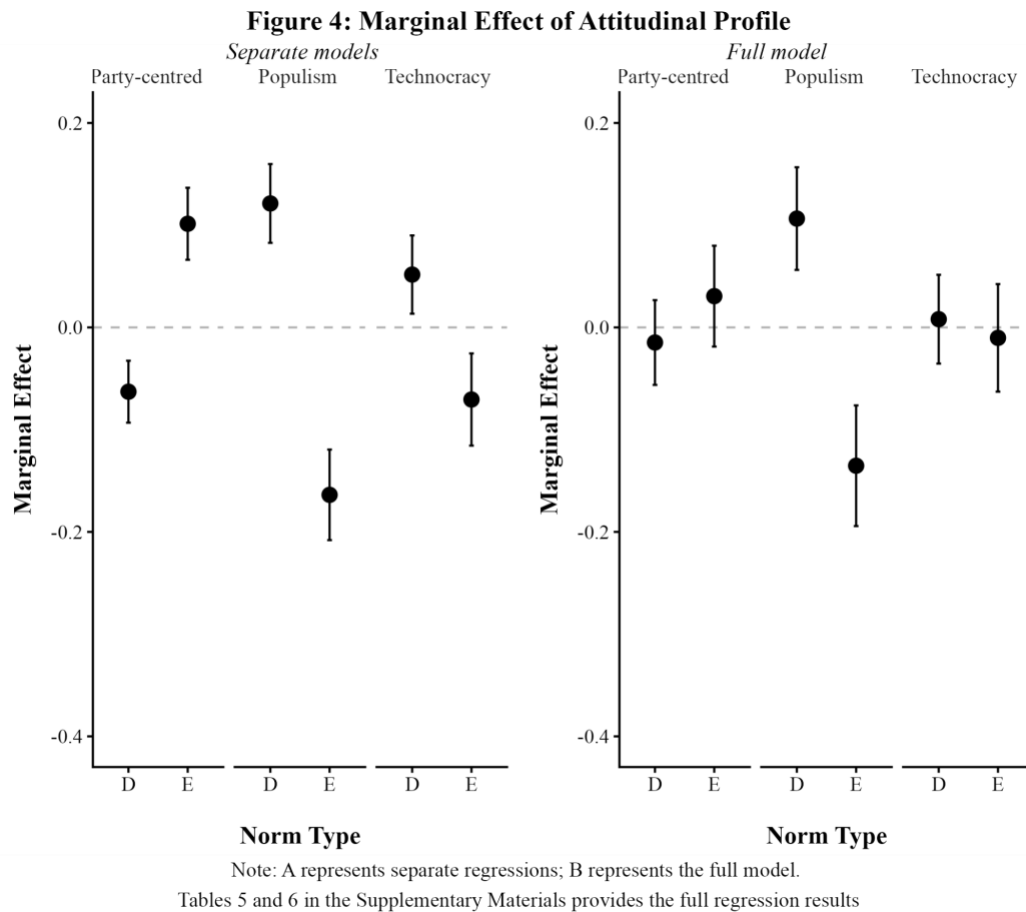
Next, we examine the effect of democratic attitudinal profiles on perceptions of how justifiable norm transgressions are, where H3a focuses on populist attitudes and H3b focuses on party-centred and technocratic attitudes. To begin with, we examined the effect of each attitudinal profile in *separate* models before exploring their interactions in a full model. As we shall see, while the separate models reveal significant effects for all three attitudinal profiles, it is only the populist findings that remain robust in the full model.

Figure 4 below plots the norm type and attitudinal profile interaction for both the separate models and the full interaction model, along with the associated 95 percent confidence interval (plots A and B, respectively). Each point can be understood as the marginal effect of achieving higher values on the attitudinal variable on normative responses, depending on whether it is an electoral or deliberative norm under consideration. For example, the populist plot illustrates the marginal effect of a respondent being more populist on their normative responses. The full regression models can be found Supplementary Materials C.

To start with the separate models (the ‘Separate models’ plot within **Figure 4**), for H3a, the populism model reveals a significant effect on responses for both electoral democracy and deliberative norms. We find what we expected for electoral democracy norms, as more populist respondents do have more permissive reactions to violations of these norms than less populist voters. However, we find the opposite of what we expected for deliberative norms, as more populist voters actually have more negative normative reactions to transgressions of these norms when compared with the rest of the sample. We find evidence in favour of H3b in the separate model for technocracy as more technocratic respondents have more negative responses to violations of deliberative norms than less technocratic voters, but more technocratic respondents also react less negatively to violations of electoral norms than other respondents. By contrast, in the separate model for party-centredness, this pattern is reversed entirely as those scoring more highly on party-centrism react more negatively to electoral norm violations

than other respondents, but less negatively to deliberative norm transgressions. In sum, while more populist and technocratic respondents share a greater intolerance for deliberative norm violations in the separate models, more party-centred voters stand-alone in aligning themselves with the academic consensus that views threats to the principles of electoral democracy as more serious.

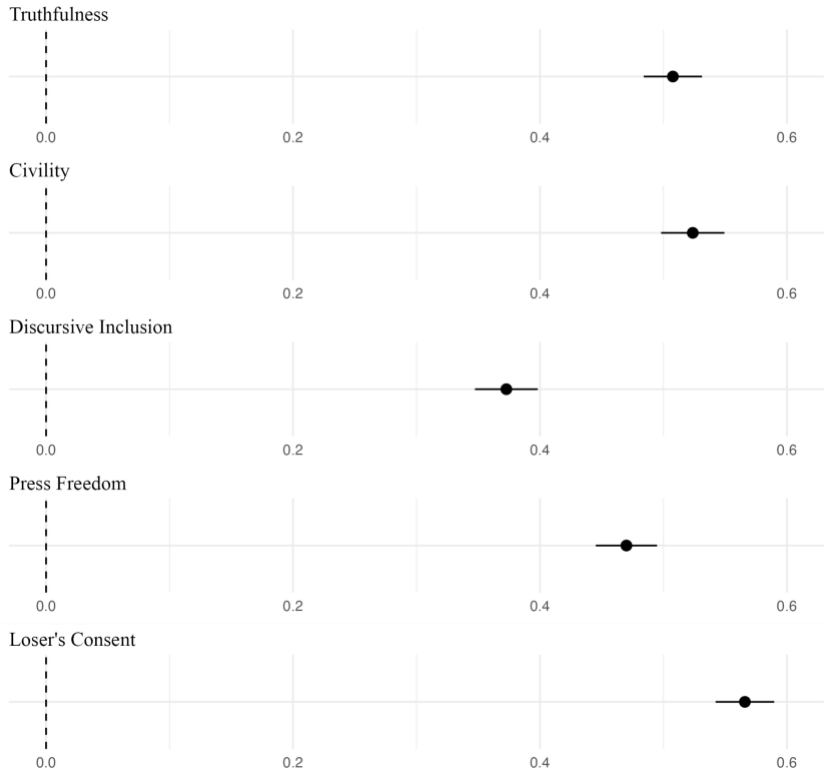
However, as suggested by the conceptual and empirical literature exploring the relationship between these concepts (Bertsou and Caramani 2022a; Bickerton and Accetti 2021), these three attitudinal profiles are not mutually exclusive. Thus, we also run one model that includes all three interactions between attitudinal profile and norm type, rather than running separate models for each interaction. The results for this are illustrated in the ‘Full model’ plot within **Figure 4**. This illustrates that when we include all three attitudinal profiles in one model, populism’s effect drowns out the effect of technocracy and party-centredness. This is because party-centred and technocratic attitudes are now insignificant for both deliberative and electoral norms, whereas the effect of populism remains unchanged. Consequently, we find strong, resilient support for the prediction in H3a that more populist respondents will be more likely to tolerate electoral democracy norm violations. However, we fail to find empirical support for H3b once competing attitudinal frameworks are properly controlled for.



We now turn to our checks on the stability and independence of respondents' attitudes. We first test if the normative standards to which citizens hold each other positively influences the standards to which they hold political elites. We ran five models, where the dependent variable is the respondent's score on the normative question for that norm in the elite setting, and the explanatory variable is the normative score they give for that norm in the citizen's context. The full regression models can be found in Supplementary Materials C. This is represented in a separate coefficient plot with 95 percent confidence intervals for each norm in **Figure 5** below. We find that there is a significant positive relationship between a respondent's answers for elites and citizens. In other words, the less willing respondents are to endorse norm violations in the citizen context, the less willing they are to endorse them in the elite context. Thus, we find that our respondents have relatively coherent attitudes to norm violations across

the citizen and elite contexts, suggesting that citizens’ normative attitudes to democratic norm violations are deep-rooted and resistant to contextual change.

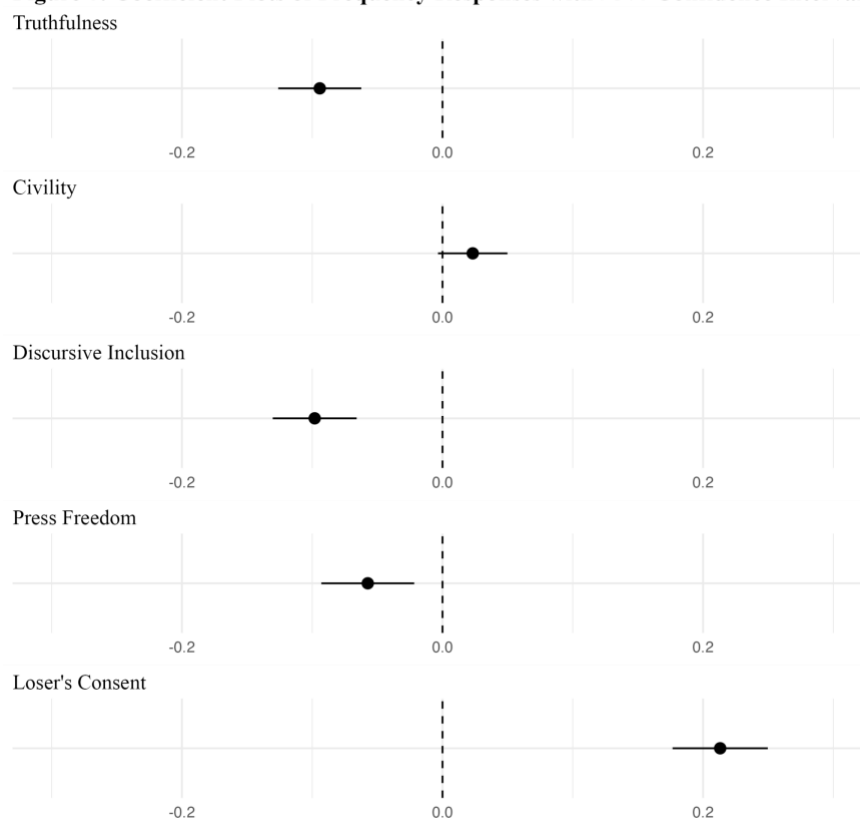
Figure 5: Coefficient Plots of Normative Responses with 95% Confidence Intervals



Note: Table 7 in the Supplementary Materials provides the full regression results

Finally, we conducted an important check on the effect of respondents' frequency perceptions of norm violations on their normative reactions to these violations. This check is especially necessary given our finding that electoral democracy norm violations are clearly and consistently seen as less violated than deliberative norm violations. We ran five models, where the dependent variable is the respondent’s score on the normative question for that norm, and the explanatory variable is the frequency score they give for that norm. The full regression models for this check can be found in Supplementary Materials C. However, **Figure 6** below plots the coefficients of the frequency scores from each regression model, along with the associated 95 percent confidence interval.

Figure 6: Coefficient Plots of Frequency Responses with 95% Confidence Intervals



Note: Table 8 in the Supplementary Materials provides the full regression results

Figure 6 shows that, while there is a statistically significant negative correlation between normative and frequency responses for truthfulness, discursive inclusion, and press freedom (i.e., if one thinks that a norm is more frequently violated, they are also more likely to think that violating that norm is less acceptable), the coefficient is positive for loser's consent and there is no significant correlation between normative and frequency responses for civility. These inconsistent results and the small substantive effect demonstrates that citizens' normative reactions to norm violations are largely *independent* of their frequency perceptions. This independence of normative judgment suggests that the more negative reactions respondents have to deliberative norm violations relative to electoral democracy violations is rooted in a deeper sensitivity to norms that are foundational to deliberative democracy over those that are integral to electoral democracy. In contrast, if respondents' reactions to norm violations were largely a function of their frequency perceptions, this would have suggested that these normative reactions are unstable and unreliable proxies for deeper normative

sensitivities. By verifying that normative judgments are largely independent of frequency perceptions, we lend support to the robustness of findings in other studies on democratic norm violations, all of which measure respondents' normative reactions to the exclusion of respondents' frequency perceptions.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we sought to build on the literature exploring public tolerance for democratic norm violations. This literature lacks a comparison of attitudes to deliberative and electoral democracy norm violations; an understanding of the extent to which normative attitudes to norm transgressions may soften or harden across different political contexts; the role of attitudinal profiles in explaining tolerance for normative violation beyond the populist phenomenon; and the effect of frequency perception on normative judgments. We attempted to do address these gaps by determining whether citizens' attitudes to norm violations depend on a) the type of norm being violated (deliberative or electoral); b) the adversarial intensity of the context in which the violation occurs (in an election campaign, the legislature, or legacy media); c) the respondent's attitudinal profile (populist, technocratic, and party-democratic attitudes); and d) the respondent's perception of how frequently specific norms are violated.

We demonstrated that citizens react substantially more negatively to violations of deliberative norms than electoral democracy norms. Given the consensus in democratic scholarship on the normative priority of electoral democracy, this finding suggests that citizens' democratic alarm systems are not wired in quite the right way since they appear more attached to the norms of deliberative quality than the norms of free and fair elections. This is concerning in one respect: free and fair elections are not only the institutional framework within which democratic deliberation takes place in representative democracies (Coppedge et al. 2020), they also serve as the institutional guarantee of wider goods like the peaceful transition of power

(Przeworski 1999). In another respect, research on the process of democratic backsliding suggests that democratic erosion is an anti-pluralist phenomenon that simultaneously involves transgressions of both deliberative and electoral democracy norms (Lührmann 2021). From this perspective, the significance of citizens' regard for deliberative norms as a bulwark against democratic backsliding should not be diminished.

Citizens' real but relatively lukewarm sensitivity to violations of electoral democracy norms may be relatively unsurprising in the context of experimental studies that show citizens are willing to trade-off their commitment to the institutions of electoral democracy and its liberal institutional complements (such as the rule of law) in exchange for partisan or policy gain (Frederiksen 2024; Graham and Svobik 2020). Given the stronger attachment to deliberative norms that we have identified, further experimental research *comparing* reactions to electoral democracy and deliberative norm violations is required to determine the extent to which citizens are in fact more or less resistant to trading-off their commitment to deliberative norms for other political goods. We also need further research to explain why citizens may react more strongly to deliberative norm violations. A promising route to explore is suggested by construal-level theory in psychology, which predicts different kinds of attitudes and behaviour depending on how concrete or abstract an event or object is perceived to be (Trope and Liberman 2010). It may be that the deliberative values like those we test in this paper are closely connected to citizens' everyday experience, making the significance of their violation more tangible than violations of electoral democracy norms, whose principles may be more abstract and less resonant with citizens' daily lives.

We also sought to determine if citizens' attitudes are influenced by the context in which the violation occurs. In line with the literature on adversarial ethics, and broader views in political science on the distinctive nature of election campaigns, we posited that proximity to adversarial

politics may be a normatively relevant distinction affecting respondents attitudes. Contrary to our expectations, we found that the closer an actor-context is to adversarial politics the more negatively norm infractions were judged. A possible explanation for this is that citizens may be more aligned with a different understanding of adversarial politics than the reduced account that has been so influential in democratic scholarship.

The main alternative to the reduced account has been dubbed the ‘relational account’ (Beerbohm 2016) and is most closely associated with the ideals of normative democracy theory. This account does not deny that election campaigns may be especially intensive adversarial affairs, nor that legislative politics or the media may get sucked into heightened levels of partisanship. The difference is that it places the normative emphasis on preserving the integrity of the *vertical relationship* between elite political actors and citizens, rather than on the normative jeopardies that these elite actors may face in the context of intensive *horizontal* party competition. Put differently, the relational model does not excuse or accept the inevitability of untruthful, uncivil, exclusionary or otherwise democratically problematic rhetoric to gain electoral or any other kind of advantage. The view is that rhetoric of this nature should be resisted because it undermines the conditions under which citizens can have trust-based relationships with political elites.

The reduced and relational accounts are two fundamentally different ways of thinking about the normative constraints of adversarial politics. The one thinks of election campaigns as a *war* where winning power is the overriding imperative, thus admitting of a more permissive political normativity than may be appropriate when advancing and justifying public policy. The other conceptualises campaigns on the model of a competitive selection *trial*, where normative standards should not be relaxed since behaviours in the election campaign should be taken as powerful indicators of how representatives will behave when they are in office. Because our findings show that citizens are more inclined to think of election campaigns as the least

justifiable context for norm violations, it suggests that they are more aligned with the normative ideals of the relational model of election campaigns than the conclusions of the reduced account.

These findings do not discount the validity of insights on the nature of adversarial ethics or the view that campaigns are especially intensive adversarial contexts. What it does suggest is that these insights may be more pertinent to understanding elite attitudes to standards of conduct in different political settings. Some survey research points in this direction, indicating that politicians and citizens tend to have different conceptions of ethical behaviour, with politicians having more minimalist and legalistic conceptions compared to citizens' broader ethical standards (Allen and Birch 2015). Importantly, despite the significance of changes in actor-context in shaping citizens' attitudes, these effects are not substantively large enough to call into question the generalisability of findings on democratic norm violations that almost universally frame their experiments in the election campaign context (Carey et al. 2022; Frederiksen 2024; Graham and Svolik 2020).

We also sought to determine whether recently developed distinctions in democratic attitudinal profiles could help to explain citizens' reactions to democratic norm violations. Not only did we gain new insight on populist citizens by testing their attitudinal profile on the distinction between electoral democracy and deliberative norm transgressions, we explored the extent to which party-democratic and technocratic attitude profiles have independent predictive power for how citizens react to norm violations. While we found significant effects for each attitudinal profile when running separate models - including that those with party-democratic attitudes appeared to buck the prevailing trend by reacting somewhat more negatively to electoral democracy violations than deliberative violations - we found that only our results with respect to populism remained robust when running a full model that combined interactions between the attitudinal profiles. This finding yields an important insight into the attitudinal

determinants of norm compliance. The statistical significance of party-democracy and technocracy in single-interaction models was largely an artifact of omitted variable bias - specifically, their inverse relationship with populism. Because more populist voters tend to be sceptical of traditional political parties and establishment procedures, party-centredness in isolated models largely appears to have acted as a reverse proxy for populist sentiment.

While our expectation was confirmed that populists tend to be more tolerant of electoral democracy norm transgressions, our expectation that populists would also be more tolerant of deliberative norm violations was flatly refuted. On the contrary, populists are more likely to be more hostile to deliberative norm violations. A possible explanation for this is that the moral overtones of anti-elitism associated with populism (Lacey 2018) leads those with more populist attitudes to judge more harshly those elites who violate familiar deliberative norms that constitute the basis of healthy communication. When we consider experimental studies that demonstrate that populists are especially susceptible to partisan effects (e.g. Lewandowsky and Jankowski. 2023) - at least when it comes to electoral democracy norms or norms connected to the rule of law - it is unlikely that the populist indignation of deliberative norm violations will survive a study that embedded a partisan manipulation where the norm violator belongs to an identified populist party.

Finally, we conducted two important checks on our findings. First, to determine the extent to which citizens' attitudes are deep-rooted or a function of our experimental design (e.g. provoking anti-elite attitudes), we examined whether our respondents hold consistent preferences across elite and non-elite contexts. We found that, despite the variation in how respondents react to elite norm violations reported above, their reaction to norm violations in the citizens context is a strong predictor of how they will feel about these violations in the elite contexts that they are assigned. Thus, it appears that our findings do track consistent and firmly held views among citizens.

Our second check has not been performed by other studies on democratic norm violations. Existing studies do not measure citizens' frequency perceptions of norm violations and thus assume that citizens' reactions to democratic norm violations are independent from these perceptions. Performing this check was especially important in the context of this paper where respondents perceived violations of electoral democracy norms as significantly less frequent than violations of deliberative norms. By running a model that includes the effect of respondents' perceived frequency of norm violations on their normative judgment, we confirmed that citizens' reactions to norm violations are largely independent of their frequency perceptions. This substantiates that citizens' variable sensitivities to electoral and deliberative norm violations are not a mere function of the design of our experiment. It also suggests that frequency perceptions may not need to be an integral part of experimental research designs into democratic norm violations.

We conclude with an observation about the generalisability of our findings. The strikingly similar patterns across our case studies indicate that citizens who have experienced more intensive forms of democratic erosion (especially in the US) do not appear to have lower tolerance for democratic norm violations. This suggests that citizens in consolidated democracies experiencing democratic backsliding have not (yet) become normalised to declining democratic standards. However, examining citizens' attitudes to democratic norm violations in younger democracies and those that have experienced more extreme and persistent democratic erosion is required to establish the conditions under which normalisation of democratic violations may be most likely to take place.

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