

Voting for Democracy? Testing Political-Cultural Constraints on Democratic Backsliding

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Abstract

Democratic backsliding continues to pose a clear danger to contemporary democracies. While a growing literature shows that voters often tolerate anti-democratic candidates when partisan or ideological incentives pull in that direction, we know less about whether support for democracy, institutional trust, political tolerance, and other democratic orientations ameliorate such temptations. We address this question with a systematic comparison of six measures of political culture as predictors of electoral resistance to anti-democratic candidates. Using candidate-choice conjoint experiments fielded in three democracies facing backsliding pressures – the United States, Poland, and South Korea – we find that several democratic orientations are associated with greater resistance to anti-democratic candidates. Among them, support for the core institutions and processes of liberal democracy stands out as the most consistent predictor. Its relationship with pro-democratic choice remains meaningful even in “cross-pressured” choices where partisan or ideological incentives pull voters away from the pro-democratic option. These findings suggest that political culture matters for democratic resilience, though some components of it matter much more consistently than others.

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1. Introduction

Backsliding continues to pose a clear danger for contemporary democracies (Nord et al. 2025), driven in part by voters who are willing to back candidates that violate democratic institutions and procedures. Evidence shows that citizens dislike anti-democratic politicians in principle yet nevertheless select such candidates once partisan identity or ideological alignment is factored in (Carey et al. 2022; Frederiksen 2024; Graham and Svobik 2020; Svobik 2020). Democratic values appear to be trumped by partisan loyalties and ideological affinities.

This finding sits uneasily alongside the classic political culture account of democratic resilience, which holds that democracy will be sustained to the extent that citizens possess civic, pro-democratic orientations toward the political system and its main actors and institutions (Almond and Verba 1963; Eckstein 1965; Easton 1965; Dahl 1971; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Yet recent candidate-choice research suggests that citizens may sacrifice democratic principles when partisan identity or ideological agreement pulls them toward anti-democratic candidates (Svobik 2020; Grossman et al. 2022). The puzzle is not simply whether citizens endorse democracy in the abstract, but whether democratic orientations are associated with pro-democratic choices when voters face partisan and ideological incentives to do otherwise.

This paper addresses this puzzle with a research design that is especially well suited to connecting democratic orientations to electoral choice. First, we consider a broad set of six measures of political culture, spanning four of its canonical dimensions: (1) socio-political values (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Welzel 2013), (2) support for democracy (Claassen et al. 2025; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998), (3) trust in political institutions (Norris 2011; Mishler and Rose 1997), and (4) support for the rights of opponents, or political tolerance (Gibson 1989; Peffley and Rohrschneider 2003; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982). Second, to test the generalizability of our results, we field parallel surveys in three democracies from different world regions, all facing backsliding pressures: the United States, Poland, and South Korea. Third, we use a candidate-conjoint experimental design that allows us to examine how respondents' political cultural orientations moderate

their propensity to select candidate who either promise to protect democratic institutions and procedures or threaten to erode these. This design also allows us to focus on critical choices across partisan and ideological divides (e.g., choosing between a pro-democratic out-party candidate and an anti-democratic in-party one), which is where the tradeoff between partisan or ideological preferences and democratic orientations comes into play. Finally, to enhance the credibility of our results we preregister our measures, design, hypotheses, and main analyses.

Our study therefore contributes to understanding of democratic resilience in two related ways. First, by linking democratic orientations to candidate choice, the study connects the political culture literature to the exercise of political power. It asks whether orientations that are often studied as abstract opinion dimensions are associated with electoral choices between pairs of candidates who would protect versus erode democratic institutions. Second, the study then offers a systematic comparison of multiple varieties of democratic orientation drawn from the political culture literature (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Norris 2011; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998), identifying which are most robustly associated with pro-democratic choice in simulated election scenarios.

Our findings speak first to the political-culture contribution of the paper. Across the six democratic orientations we examine, support for liberal democracy (Claassen et al. 2025) emerges as the measure most consistently associated with resistance to anti-democratic candidates. Three other orientations – democracy-autocracy preferences (e.g., Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998), political tolerance (e.g., Peffley and Rohrschneider 2003), and emancipative values (Welzel 2013) – are also implicated in at least some samples and specifications. In this respect, the results echo long-standing claims in the political-culture tradition (since Almond and Verba 1963; Eckstein 1965) that citizens’ beliefs and orientations can help protect democracy, while also showing that not all components of political culture are equally consequential for democratic choice.

Our results also speak to the behavioral microfoundations of democratic backsliding. They confirm the now familiar finding that partisan identity and ideological proximity remain powerful in structuring vote choice (Carey et al. 2022; Frederiksen 2024; Graham and Svobik 2020; Svobik

2020). But these forces do not render democratic commitments irrelevant. Even in the most demanding cross-pressured choices, where partisanship pulls voters away from the pro-democratic candidate, support for liberal democracy remains associated with pro-democratic choice: a one-standard-deviation increase on this scale is associated with a 2–12 percentage-point increase in the probability of choosing the pro-democratic candidate across party lines, depending on specification and sample. These shifts can be electorally consequential, especially in close contests, while also underscoring that democratic orientations may not themselves be sufficient to produce majority support for pro-democratic out-party candidates.

2. The behavioral micro-foundations of backsliding

Recent research has made major progress in identifying the behavioral micro-foundations of democratic backsliding. Using candidate-choice conjoint experiments, this literature shows that many voters are willing to tolerate anti-democratic candidates when partisan or ideological incentives pull in that direction (Svolik 2020; Graham and Svolik 2020; Gidengil, Stolle, and Bergeron-Boutin 2022). While Carey et al. (2022) argues that voters do punish anti-democratic behavior when violations target core institutional checks, the broader pattern remains one in which only a minority defect from their party or ideological camp to defend democracy (Frederiksen 2024). A subsequent literature then asks why partisan and ideological attachments so often outweigh democratic concerns. One line of work emphasizes partisan double standards, whereby voters excuse or relabel anti-democratic conduct by their own side while condemning the same behavior by opponents (Krishnarajan 2023; Grossman et al. 2022; Braley et al. 2023). Another emphasizes the relative weight voters place on democracy when set against partisanship, policy agreement, or fears of out-party rule (Aarslew 2023; Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022).

Across these accounts, however, democratic values and other political-culture orientations are rarely treated as distinct explanatory variables that can be measured independently of the experimental choice and evaluated alongside partisan and ideological considerations. To be sure, both Svolik (2020) and Grossman et al. (2022) examine support for democracy, and both conclude

that it is only weakly related to choosing pro- rather than anti-democratic candidates. Yet these studies rely on relatively narrow measures of democratic support – including the single item used by Svoboda – and do not consider other democratic orientations.

This gap is striking because the question of how to conceptualize and measure citizens' pro-democratic orientations has been a major concern of political science since its behavioral turn in the 1960s. A large literature distinguishes multiple facets of democratic political culture – including support for democracy, tolerance of political opponents, trust in representative institutions, and deeper value commitments – and debates how best to measure each (Easton 1965; Dahl 1971; Gibson 1989; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982; Mishler and Rose 1997; Norris 2011; Inglehart 2003; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Welzel 2013; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998; Claassen et al. 2025). In short, we possess rich theory and well-developed measurement traditions for democratic orientations, yet these have rarely been brought to bear on the micro-level study of democratic backsliding.

More recent work shows that when democratic orientations are measured with greater care, they do appear to constrain support for backsliding. In a study of the United States, Germany, and Israel, Peffley et al. (2025) find that opposition to authoritarian rule and support for liberal democracy are associated with reduced support for anti-democratic actions, and that these associations are stronger than those involving partisan animosity. Their design, however, asks directly about approval of specific anti-democratic acts rather than embedding them in broader candidate choices, which likely makes the democratic stakes more explicit than in ordinary voting decisions. Moreover, because their analyses pool across in-party and out-party conditions, they do not isolate the hardest case for democracy: whether political-culture orientations still constrain citizens when their own party advances undemocratic proposals.

Wunsch, Jacob, and Derksen (2025) explicitly take up this harder test by fielding a candidate-choice conjoint in Poland and examining whether citizens' understandings of democracy shape support for pro- versus anti-democratic candidates (see also Wunsch 2025). They find that liberal understandings of democracy, but not majoritarian or authoritarian ones, are associated with

punishment of anti-democratic candidates, even when those candidates come from respondents' preferred party. Yet their conclusion that "the relative strength of liberal democratic commitment is most crucial to citizens' willingness to counter democratic backsliding at the ballot box" sits uneasily with the fact that their measures capture understandings of democracy rather than democratic commitment itself. This tension suggests the need to return to the classic political-culture tradition, where democratic commitment has been conceptualized and measured in multiple ways, for a more comprehensive test of the role such orientations play in preventing backsliding.

3. The elements of a democratic political culture

Political culture can be understood as the public's orientations to the political system. Most scholars have described it as multidimensional, i.e., a political culture comprises multiple orientations towards different aspects of the political system: its fundamental values, the regime type, its political institutions, the authorities, the role of the self and other citizens (Norris 1999; 2011; Dalton 2004; Fuchs 2007). Consistent with this view, we focus on four broad democratic orientations that are widely employed: (1) support for democracy as a regime, (2) trust in the institutions of the political system, (3) tolerance of opponents' political rights, and (4) socio-political values (see Table 1).¹

The first dimension we consider is support for democracy as a regime. Traditionally, this has been measured with survey questions asking respondents both how strongly they support democracy in the abstract and whether they would accept undemocratic alternatives such as military rule or a strong leader unconstrained by parliament (Clayton et al. 2021; Magalhães 2014; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998; Norris 2011). Such batteries are now widespread in cross-national survey research but they remain controversial because democracy is a complex and

¹This is not an exhaustive list of aspects of political culture. An emerging line of research examines democratic norms, understood as shared social expectations or informal rules of appropriate political behavior (e.g., Goldstein 2022).

Table 1. Political culture: orientations, measures, and items

Orientation	Measure	Survey items	Indicative source
A. Democracy as an ideal-type regime	1. Democracy-autocracy preference	4 items, e.g., “Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.”	Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer (1998)
	2. Support for liberal democracy	7 items, e.g., “We should rethink the universal right to vote since so many voters are poorly informed and easily misled.”	Claassen et al. (2025)
B. Institutions of the political system	3. Institutional trust	4 items, e.g., “How much do you trust each of the following? The justice/legal system”	Norris (2011)
C. Rights of political opponents	4. Political tolerance	3 items, e.g., “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about <i>least-liked group</i> : They should not be allowed to vote”	Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1982)
D. Socio-political values	5. Emancipative values	13 items, e.g., “If you had to choose, which one of these things would you say is most important? Maintaining order in the nation”	Welzel (2013)
	6. Authoritarian values	8 items, e.g., “Using a 0-10 scale, rate how similar the person is to you. <i>She</i> believes <i>she</i> should always show respect to <i>her</i> parents and to older people. It is important to <i>her</i> to be obedient.”	Norris and Inglehart (2019)

normatively loaded concept that many citizens may endorse almost by default (Inglehart 2003). In response, recent work has developed more concrete and granular measures. In a 19-country study, Claassen et al. (2025) develop a measure of “support for liberal democracy” that focuses on seven core institutional features identified by the Varieties of Democracy project, including free speech, equal voting rights, judicial and legislative oversight, and the rule of law.² Whatever the measure, citizens with stronger pro-democratic commitments should be less willing to reward candidates who threaten those institutions.

The second dimension we examine is institutional trust, understood as citizens’ belief that

²Support for democracy should be distinguished from a related construct that has become more prominent in recent years: citizens’ understandings of democracy (see, e.g., Ferrín and Kriesi 2016). Citizens may correctly identify free speech or protest rights as important features of democracy, but such conceptual understandings are distinct from normative support for those rights.

political institutions and actors will behave in line with their expectations and with the public interest (Dalton 2004; Norris 2011). Trust has often been treated as a form of diffuse support for the political system: when citizens trust representative institutions, courts, and parties, they are thought to view the system as broadly legitimate even when they oppose specific incumbents (Booth and Seligson 2009; Mishler and Rose 1997). While some authors have linked low levels of trust with democratic decline (Miller 1974), evidence is limited. Low trust voters may instead be more willing to endorse leaders who attack the system as corrupt or unresponsive, including explicitly anti-democratic challengers (Akkerman, Zaslove, and Spruyt 2017). Political trust is therefore a plausible mechanism linking citizens' institutional orientations to their willingness to tolerate anti-democratic appeals.

The third dimension we consider is political tolerance, which refers to the belief that all citizens, especially one's opponents, should be allowed to speak, organize, campaign, and compete for power (Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982; Peffley and Rohrschneider 2003). A tolerant political culture is one in which citizens accept that even groups they dislike should enjoy full civil and political rights, whereas an intolerant culture endorses the exclusion or repression of unpopular groups (Gibson and Gouws 2003; Elazar 1973). Scholars have long warned that intolerance is corrosive: when citizens are willing to silence rivals, they implicitly license parties and leaders who promise to do the silencing (Gibson 1989). Politically tolerant voters should therefore be more resistant to candidates who openly threaten democratic institutions and procedures.

Finally, models of political culture have also included deeper socio-political values – fundamental principles that guide citizens' beliefs and actions (Fuchs 2007; Dalton 2004). One influential line of work emphasizes emancipative values (formerly self-expression values; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Welzel 2013), which stress individual autonomy, equality, and voice, and which are believed to generate bottom-up support for democratic accountability, civil liberties, and protections against arbitrary power. A related tradition focuses on authoritarian-libertarian values, rooted in work on the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al. 1950; Feldman 2003). Authoritarian orientations emphasize social conformity, obedience to authority, and hostility to perceived deviance,

and may therefore make citizens more accepting of candidates who violate institutional constraints (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

In sum, these four strands – support for democracy, institutional trust, political tolerance, and socio-political values – capture distinct components of a democratic political culture. We expect that more pro-democratic orientations on any of the four dimensions will be associated with greater support for pro-democratic candidates and less support for anti-democratic ones. In other words, citizens who are more committed to democracy as a regime, more trusting of representative institutions, more tolerant of their opponents’ rights, and more supportive of emancipative and libertarian values should be less willing to reward candidates who threaten elections, courts, or a free press. Importantly, we expect these relationships to hold even in difficult cross-pressured cases, when voters must choose between a pro-democratic out-party or ideologically distant candidate and an anti-democratic in-party or ideologically proximate one.

We test these expectations with six preregistered hypotheses. H1–H3 examine whether political-culture orientations moderate the effect of pro- versus anti-democratic candidate positions across three choice settings: all candidate choices (H1), cross-party choices (H2), and cross-ideological choices (H3). The latter two are both more demanding than the overall test because they isolate cases in which democratic considerations conflict with either partisan loyalty or ideological proximity. H4–H6 parallel H1–H3 but use an alternative model specification estimating whether political-culture orientations are associated with the probability of selecting pro-democratic candidates. We describe these estimators, along with the data and measures, in the next section.

4. Data and Methods

4.1. Data

Our data come from three online surveys that were fielded in Poland, the United States, and South Korea between 5–19 September 2025 by the polling firm Savanta. The target was approximately 2,000 respondents per country, recruited via quota sampling on age group and gender. Each sur-

vey included three attention checks; respondents who failed any one check were screened out by Savanta and their data were not retained. As specified in the preregistration, we excluded “speedsters” who completed the questionnaire in less than 40% of their country’s median response time. This removed 33 cases in the US, 27 in South Korea, and 43 in Poland. The analytic samples are 1,983 in the US, 2,001 in South Korea, and 1,967 in Poland. The surveys received ethical approval from [redacted for anonymity] on 28 July 2025.

4.2. Preregistration of the design and analyses

The design and analyses were preregistered at the Open Science Framework on 21 August 2025.³ It specifies: the six measures of democratic political culture and their constituent survey items; the conjoint design and wording, including the manipulation of pro- vs. anti-democratic statements; the operationalization of in- and out-parties and ideological proximity; primary estimands and hypotheses; and the estimation strategy: Average Treatment Moderation Effects (ATMEs) and direct linear probability models (LPMs).

4.3. Experimental design

We implemented a paired-profile candidate-choice conjoint based on that used in Frederiksen’s (2022; 2024) five-country study. Respondents evaluated 12 pairs of political candidates profiles featuring seven attributes with randomly assigned levels: age; gender; occupational background; party affiliation; a redistributive policy position; a gender-equality policy position; and a stance on the political system (i.e., the pro- vs anti-democracy treatment). The profiles were described as hypothetical presidential candidates in the US and South Korea and parliamentary candidates in Poland. Within each pair, the two candidates were designed to always hold opposing positions on

³See <https://osf.io/um6xa/overview>. See also the supplementary materials, section 2, for a consolidated summary of preregistered and non-preregistered analyses.

the political system attribute (one pro-democratic, one anti-democratic).⁴ This increases power for the core democratic-choice contrasts that are required for all of our hypotheses.

Table 2. Conjoint experiment design

Age
35, 44, 51, 59, 64, 68
Gender
Male [0.8], Female [0.2]
Background
Lawyer; Political career; Journalist; Company director/founder; Military career; Professional sportsperson; Scientist
Party
<i>United States:</i> Democrat [0.5], Republican [0.5]
<i>Poland:</i> Law and Justice (PiS) [0.35], Civic Coalition (KO) [0.35], Confederation Freedom and Independence (Konfederacja) [0.15], Lewica [0.15]
<i>South Korea:</i> Democratic Party of Korea [0.5], People Power Party [0.5]
Views on tax and spending
1) Increase spending on public services and social programs.
2) Decrease spending on public services and social programs.
3) Increase income tax on the richest 10%.
4) Decrease income tax on the richest 10%.
Views on gender policy
1) Companies should be required to give preference to women when hiring for jobs where men are overrepresented.
2) Companies should not be required to give preference to women when hiring even for jobs where men are overrepresented.
3) Political parties should be required to have gender quotas to ensure equal numbers of male and female candidates.
4) Political parties should not be required to have gender quotas to ensure equal numbers of male and female candidates.
Views on changes to the political system
1) Cut the number of polling stations in areas that support opposing parties.
2) Keep all polling stations, even in areas that support opposing parties.
3) Ignore court rulings by judges who were appointed by opposing parties.
4) Respect court rulings, even if judges were appointed by opposing parties.
5) Prosecute journalists who accuse the [executive] of misconduct without revealing their sources.
6) Do not prosecute journalists who accuse the [executive] of misconduct, even if they do not reveal their sources.

⁴Our design therefore cannot decompose the pro- vs. anti-democratic contrast into separate punishment of anti-democratic candidates and reward for explicitly pro-democratic candidates.

As Table 2 shows, the pro- vs anti-democracy attribute was presented to respondents as candidates' "views on changes to the political system", and took the form of six levels that map onto three democratic institutions: free and fair elections (keeping vs. cutting polling stations), judicial oversight (respecting vs. ignoring court rulings), and freedom of expression (not prosecuting vs. prosecuting journalists). The two candidates in a pair were not necessarily assigned opposing positions on the same democratic institution.

Candidates were also given party affiliations and policy positions. In the US and South Korea, only the two main party labels were used, i.e., Democratic / Republican, and Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) / People Power Party (PPP) respectively. In Poland, four party assignments were used: first, with 35% probability each, the two main right and left parties/coalitions, Law and Justice (PiS) and Civic Coalition (KO); second, with 15% probability each, a smaller (far)-right party, Confederation Freedom and Independence (Konfederacja), and a smaller left-wing alliance, Left (Lewica). In each sample, candidates were also allocated positions on two ideological domains, gender and redistribution, with left / liberal and right / conservative positions for each.⁵

Pairs of randomly generated candidates were presented in a table, with respondents asked to choose which they preferred. In the US and South Korea, this was described as follows: "Imagine the following two candidates run in the next presidential election;" in Poland, it was described as follows: "Imagine the following two candidates run in your constituency in the next election for the Sejm." In all samples respondents were then asked to "please read their profiles and tell us how likely you would be to vote for them at the election." This choice was repeated 12 times for each respondent using randomly generated pairs of candidates. After each pair, respondents were asked, "which candidate do you prefer?", with response options "candidate 1" and "candidate 2."

⁵Marginal mean results from the experiments are included in the supplementary materials, Figures S1–S3.

4.4. Measures of democratic political culture

We examine six measures of political culture that span four broad orientations to the political system, as described in Table 1.

Support for democracy as an ideal-type regime (two measures): (1) a four-item *democracy–autocracy preference* scale capturing evaluations of democracy and an undemocratic executive-dominant regime based on existing measures (e.g., Clayton et al. 2021; Magalhães 2014; Norris 2011); (2) a seven-item *support for liberal democracy* scale tapping support for the core institutions of liberal democracy (freedom of expression and association, voting rights, free and fair elections, judicial and legislative oversight, and the rule of law) based on the measure developed by Claassen et al. (2025).

Rights of political opponents (3) a three-item *political tolerance* scale using a “least-liked” groups methodology (Gibson and Gouws 2003; Peffley and Rohrschneider 2003; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982). Respondents first identified the group or organization they disliked most from a country-specific list and then indicated whether members of that group should be allowed to vote, run for public office, and organize public rallies.

Institutions of the political system (4) a four-item *institutional trust* scale capturing trust in the justice system, legislature, civil service, and major political parties (e.g., Dalton 2004; Norris 2011).

Socio-political values (two measures): (5) an *emancipative values* scale based on three-item autonomy, equality, and choice subscales, plus a four-item voice subscale (Welzel 2013); (6) an *authoritarian values* scale constructed from eight items in the Twenty Item Values Inventory (Sandy et al. 2017) tapping the Schwartz values of conformity, tradition, self-direction, and stimulation, which has previously been used to measure authoritarian values (see Feldman 2003; Norris and Inglehart 2019).

All constituent items, response scales, and details of scale construction are reported in

supplementary materials Section 1; reliability and factor-structure diagnostics are reported in Table S4. Scales are unit-normal standardized within country.

4.5. Partisanship and ideological proximity

We measure respondents' party evaluations using 0–10 feeling thermometer scales. Following the preregistration, a candidate counts as an *in-party* candidate for a respondent if the respondent rates the candidate's assigned party 6–10; an *out-party* candidate is one whose party is rated 0–4 by the respondent. Because these classifications are based on thermometer ratings rather than exclusive party identification, respondents, even in the two-party US and South Korean samples, may have more than one in-party or out-party, or none. Cross-party analyses are therefore defined at the respondent-profile-pair level: only tasks in which a pro-democratic out-party candidate faces an anti-democratic in-party candidate enter the H2 subset.

To measure respondent-candidate ideological proximity, we asked respondents their views on four issue statements using five-point response scales: two concerning redistribution and two concerning gender equality. Following the procedure used by Frederiksen (2024) and specified in our preregistration, we code respondent positions from 1 to 5, with higher values indicating a more liberal or left position. Candidate positions are coded 4.5 when a profile takes the liberal or left position and 1.5 when it takes the conservative or right position. For each issue, we then calculate the absolute distance between respondent and candidate positions. Finally, to test H3, we classify candidates as *ideologically proximate* (distance = 0.5) or *ideologically distal* (distance > 0.5) to the respondent on each issue.

4.6. Empirical strategy

Our primary preregistered hypotheses (H1–H3) concern Average Treatment Moderation Effects (ATMEs) (Bansak 2020). We fit ATMEs for respondents' overall pro- vs. anti-democratic choice (H1), their choices in cross-party scenarios (H2), and their choices in cross-ideology scenarios (H3). ATMEs can be seen as an extension of the treatment-effect heterogeneity often analyzed

in survey experiments, i.e., whether the effect of a randomized treatment varies across levels of a pre-treatment attribute (Imai and Strauss 2011). They extend such analyses by estimating how much the treatment effect changes for a one-unit shift in the moderator, rather than simply whether it differs across moderator levels.

In the present study, the ATME is the difference in the slope relating a culture measure Z to candidate choice across pro- versus anti-democratic treatments: $ATME = \beta_Z^{PD} - \beta_Z^{AD}$, where PD denotes the pro-democratic candidate in each pair and AD the anti-democratic candidate. As such, the ATMEs we estimate show whether the effect of a candidate’s pro- versus anti-democratic position on vote choice becomes stronger or weaker as a respondent’s level of political culture changes. As respondents make multiple choices in our design, we cluster standard errors by respondent.

We also preregistered a parallel set of three hypotheses (H4–H6) using Linear Probability Models (LPMs) to estimate associations between political culture measures and the probability of choosing the pro-democratic rather than anti-democratic candidate, with standard errors clustered by respondent. We fit LPMs for overall choice, the cross-party subset, and the cross-ideology subset; these correspond to H4–H6 in the preregistration. As the LPM and ATME estimators produce very similar results, we focus on the latter in the main paper, with LPM results summarized in the results section and reported in full in the supplementary materials.

Both the ATMEs and the LPMs are observational estimands: while candidate attributes are randomized, respondent traits such as political-culture attitudes are not. As such, these estimates should not be interpreted as causal effects of democratic orientations themselves. We therefore include control variables to adjust for some of the differences between respondents, but unmeasured respondent traits may still confound observed associations by shaping both support for liberal democracy and responsiveness to democratic violations. As the preregistration did not specify a set of control variables, we use two specifications. The first includes all survey demographics (gender, age, education, income, region), political interest, party evaluations, respondents’ positions on redistribution and gender, and the other political culture measures. Given some modest

to substantial correlations among the culture measures,⁶ we also report a basic specification in the supplementary materials that omits the other political-culture controls. Note that ATMEs allow all covariate coefficients to vary across the pro- and anti-democratic treatment conditions in a manner analogous to allowing all covariates to interact with the pro- vs. anti-democratic treatment.

Our analysis proceeds in four steps. First, we present descriptive baseline patterns, showing non-parametric associations between each political-culture measure and respondents' propensity to choose the pro-democratic candidate across all conjoint comparisons. Second, we report our preregistered, model-based ATMEs. Third, we assess the substantive magnitude of the main relationships using predicted-probability estimates. Finally, we report robustness tests in which we drop certain items from the support for liberal democracy scale that overlap conceptually with the pro- vs anti-democratic treatments in the conjoint. All analyses are unweighted.

5. Results

5.1. Baseline Patterns

We begin with descriptive baseline patterns showing how political culture relates to pro-democratic candidate choice across different electoral contexts. These non-parametric results provide an intuitive preview of the relationships tested more formally in subsequent analyses.

Figure 1 plots the mean probability of choosing the pro-democratic candidate across respondents' twelve conjoint tasks, binned by deciles of each political-culture measure. Black lines show unconditional choice rates across all tasks. Gold lines restrict the sample to cross-party choices, where respondents choose between a pro-democratic out-party candidate and an anti-democratic in-party candidate. Blue lines restrict the sample to cross-ideological choices, where the pro-democratic candidate is ideologically distal on redistributive policy and the anti-democratic

⁶For example, a correlation of 0.47 between authoritarian and emancipative values in Poland and a correlation of 0.68 between democracy–autocracy preference and support for liberal democracy in the United States; see Tables S5–S7 for the full within-country correlation matrices.

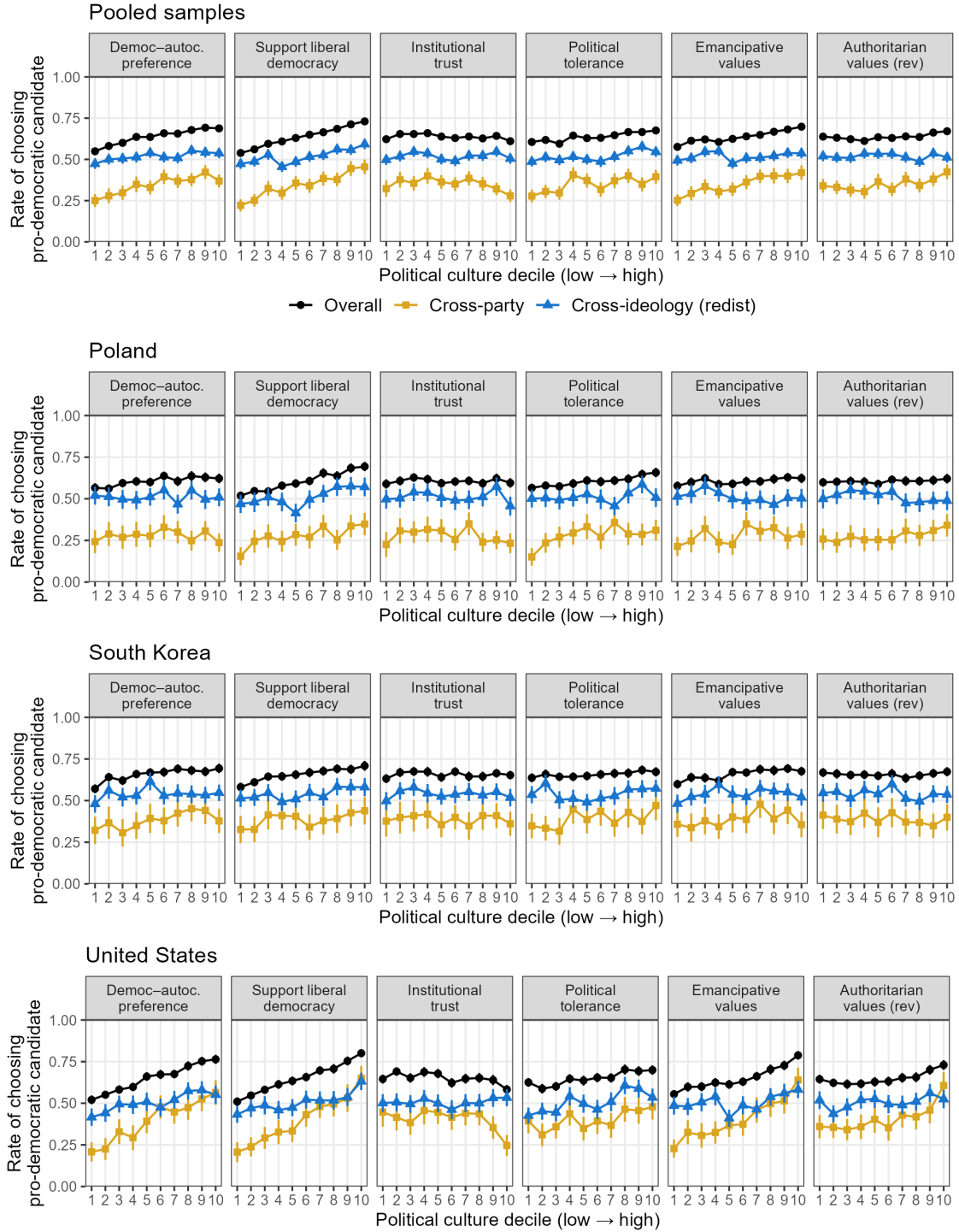
candidate is proximate.

The figure shows that several dimensions of political culture are positively associated with choosing the pro-democratic candidate. In the pooled data and overall comparison (black lines), four of the six measures – democracy–autocracy preference, emancipative values, political tolerance, and support for liberal democracy – display positive associations, indicating that stronger democratic orientations are associated with higher rates of pro-democratic choice. These relationships are most pronounced in the United States and more modest in Poland and South Korea, but the overall pattern is broadly consistent across contexts. Institutional trust and authoritarian values are the two measures that do not display such patterns.

Bivariate linear probability models between each of the six political-culture scales and pro-versus anti-democratic choice (Table S8) tell a similar story. Across all three national samples, support for liberal democracy has the strongest bivariate association: a one-standard-deviation increase is associated with an increase of .055 in the probability of pro-democratic choice in Poland, .037 in South Korea, and .087 in the United States. Democracy-autocracy preference is also positively associated with pro-democratic choice in all three cases, though generally less strongly (.021, .030, and .078, respectively), while political tolerance and emancipative values show weaker but generally positive associations. By contrast, institutional trust is essentially unrelated to pro-democratic choice in Poland and South Korea and in fact shows a weakly negatively association in the US; authoritarian values show little relationship in the Polish and Korean samples but a modest positive one in the US.

At the same time, the figure shows that partisan and ideological incentives exert a powerful pull on vote choice. Cross-ideological choices (blue lines) generally show lower rates of pro-democratic choice than the overall comparison, while cross-party choices (gold lines) are lower still, reflecting the sizable partisan premium identified by Graham and Svoboda (2020) and others. These patterns underscore the difficulty of defending democracy at the ballot box when doing so requires voting against one's preferred party. Even so, several political-culture measures continue to show upward slopes in these more demanding settings, especially support for liberal democracy.

Figure 1. Probability of selecting pro-democratic candidate by measure of political culture



Binned (decile) means with 95% CIs showing the association between six measures of political culture (x-axes) and the propensity to choose the pro-democratic candidate (y-axes). Black lines: overall rate. Blue lines: choices across the redistributive policy divides. Gold lines: choices across party lines.

There is therefore an ambiguity in how we interpret these initial results (see also Frederiksen 2024). Higher democratic orientations are associated with greater willingness to choose pro-democratic candidates, even under cross-pressure. Yet, in the cross-party setting, even respondents with high democratic orientations often remain below the 50 percent threshold for choosing the pro-democratic out-party candidate. This more demanding criterion is met only in the United States sample, and only for four orientations: the two support-for-democracy scales and the two socio-political values scales. The descriptive patterns therefore suggest that political culture is associated with democratic electoral choice, while also highlighting the limits of its influence when partisan and ideological incentives point in the opposite direction.

These descriptive results motivate the preregistered, model-based analyses that follow, which condition explicitly on partisanship, policy preferences, and other covariates to test whether political culture moderates support for pro- versus anti-democratic candidates under increasingly demanding conditions.

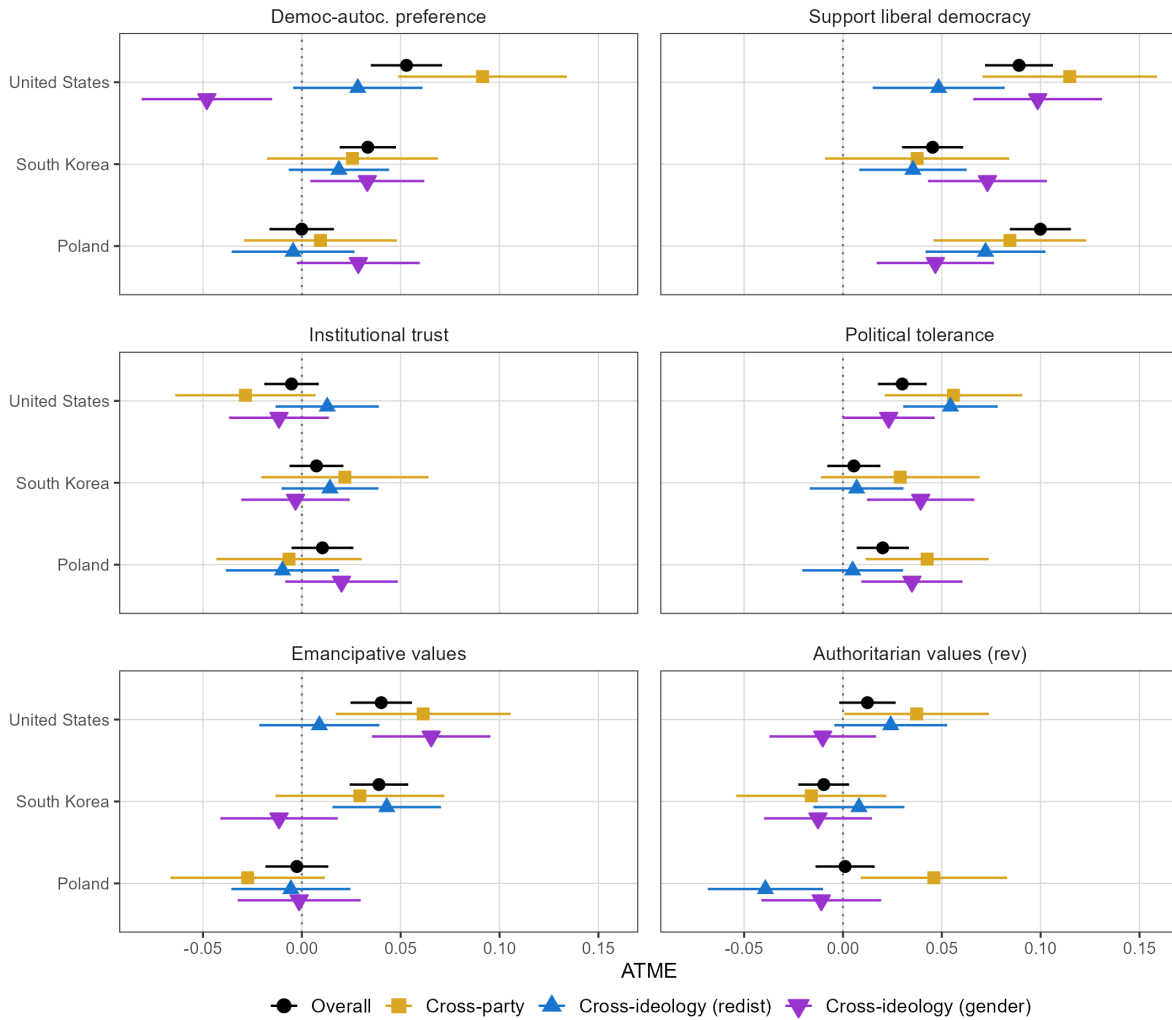
5.2. Core Preregistered Tests

Our first set of preregistered analyses estimates average treatment moderation effects (ATMEs). These test whether political culture alters voters' responses to pro- versus anti-democratic candidates, and in particular whether stronger democratic orientations amplify support for pro-democratic candidates even when democratic commitments conflict with partisan or ideological incentives.

Figure 2 presents these results, by political culture measure, national sample, and candidate choice scenario. The *overall* scenario uses all conjoint tasks (H1). The *cross-party* choice scenario restricts the sample to profile pairs in which a pro-democratic out-party candidate faces an anti-democratic in-party candidate (H2). The *cross-ideology* scenario restrict the sample to pairs in which the pro-democratic candidate is ideologically distal and the anti-democratic candidate ideologically proximate, using both redistributive and gender issues (H3).

In the overall tests (black points), four culture measures exhibit positive and statistically significant ATMEs in at least some settings: democracy–autocracy preference, support for liberal

Figure 2. ATME results



These plots show the average treatment moderation effects. “Overall” = pro-democratic vs. anti-democratic candidate choice; “Cross-party” = pro-democratic out-party vs. anti-democratic in-party choice; “Cross-ideology” = pro-democratic ideologically distal vs. anti-democratic ideologically proximate choice. Models include controls for gender, age, education, income, subnational region, political interest, most-preferred party, gender-policy preferences, redistributive-policy preferences, and the five other political culture measures. Standard errors are clustered by respondent; 95% confidence intervals shown.

democracy, political tolerance, and emancipative values. But only support for liberal democracy is positive and significant in all three national samples. The other significant patterns are less uniform: democracy–autocracy preference and emancipative values are significant in the United States and South Korea but not Poland, while political tolerance is significant in the United States and Poland but not South Korea.

The cross-party tests (gold points) are more demanding because they force a direct trade-off between partisan loyalty and democratic commitments. Here the results vary across countries. In the United States, all measures except institutional trust show positive and statistically significant cross-party moderation effects. In Poland, support for liberal democracy, political tolerance, and authoritarian values yield significant positive ATMEs. In South Korea, by contrast, none of the political-culture measures produces a statistically significant cross-party ATME.⁷

The cross-ideology tests (blue and violet points) are also demanding because they isolate cases in which democratic considerations conflict with ideological proximity. Support for liberal democracy again stands out as the only measure to produce consistently positive effects across both issue dimensions and all three countries. Other measures show weaker and less uniform moderation: political tolerance and emancipative values are positive in some country-by-issue comparisons, while democracy–autocracy preference shows no consistent positive pattern. The broad pattern remains one in which support for liberal democracy is the only measure that generalizes consistently across both ideological domains.

These estimates come from specifications that control for the other political culture measures as well as the full set of demographic and political covariates. Because the six culture measures overlap conceptually and are moderately to strongly correlated, the Supplementary Materials also report ATME results (Table S10) that omit the other political-culture measures from the control set. As expected, these estimates are generally larger and more frequently significant.

In sum, support for liberal democracy shows the most consistent associations with pro-democratic candidate choice across scenarios and samples: it is positive in every country-specific ATME estimate and significant in 11 of 12 tests using conventional p-values and more restrictive Benjamini-Hochberg q-values that adjust for the false discovery rate (Table S9), with the South Korean cross-party test as the exception. Other orientations show more selective associations with

⁷This may partly reflect lower precision in the South Korean cross-party tests. In the South Korean sample, 874 respondents contributed to this test because they had both an in-party and an out-party, compared with 1,271 respondents in Poland and 1,077 in the United States.

pro-democratic choice, with institutional trust generally having little to no association across our tests.

As a second set of preregistered analyses, we estimate linear probability models corresponding to H4–H6, where the outcome directly encodes choice of the pro-democratic rather than anti-democratic candidate. These results closely mirror the ATMEs. Support for liberal democracy again emerges as the most consistent predictor of pro-democratic choice; democracy–autocracy preference, political tolerance, and emancipative values show more mixed evidence; and institutional trust and authoritarian values show little. The full set of LPM results is reported in the Supplementary Materials (Tables S11 and S12).

Overall, the preregistered tests show that one component of political culture – support for liberal democracy – most consistently moderates voters’ responses to pro- versus anti-democratic candidates, including under partisan and ideological cross-pressure. Other orientations sometimes play a similar role, but less reliably and more contingently.

5.3. Substantive Magnitude of Effects

To show the substantive size of these relationships, we estimate logit models of pro- versus anti-democratic candidate choice, and use these to calculate first differences in predicted probabilities for a one-standard-deviation shift in each political-culture measure. Because the conjoint design forces a choice between a pro-democratic and an anti-democratic candidate, these direct-effect estimates closely mirror the ATME results: orientations that more strongly moderate responsiveness to the democratic treatment also tend to be associated with a higher probability of choosing the pro-democratic candidate. We present the full set of results in the Supplementary Materials (Table S16) and focus here on the substantive magnitudes implied by those models.

For support for liberal democracy, a one standard deviation increase from the sample mean of zero is associated with increases in pro-democratic choice of about 2.2 to 6.8 percentage points in the overall comparisons, depending on sample and control specification. In cross-party comparisons, the corresponding change in predicted support for the pro-democratic candidate is 1.9

to 11.8 percentage points, while the corresponding cross-ideology changes range from 1.8 to 4.2 percentage points for redistribution and from 2.3 to 4.9 points for gender policy. These effects are of course not large enough to erase partisan or ideological incentives wholesale, but they indicate that liberal-democratic support remains modestly and potentially consequentially associated with democratic electoral choice, especially where electoral races are competitive.

5.4. Robustness Tests

A possible concern about the support for liberal democracy measure is that some of its items map onto the same broad institutional domains manipulated in the conjoint democracy attribute. This is most clear for the judicial oversight item, which overlaps in both content and wording with one of the three pro- vs anti-democratic treatments (see Table S13). It may also apply, though less directly, to the media-restriction and voting-rights items, which refer to the same institutional domains of liberal democracy as the conjoint treatments, even if their wording differs. First, we re-estimate the support for liberal democracy scale after dropping the judicial-oversight item. Second, we re-estimate the scale after dropping all three potentially overlapping items: judicial oversight, media restrictions, and voting rights. We then rerun the ATME analyses using these revised scales.⁸

The results are similar, though somewhat weaker than in the main specification. When dropping only the judicial-oversight item, support for liberal democracy remains positively associated with pro-democratic choice in all country-scenario combinations. In the full-control specification, however, two South Korean estimates are not statistically significant: the cross-party estimate and the cross-ideology redistribution estimate (Table S14). In the basic-control specification, the revised scale remains statistically significant in all tests.

The more demanding three-item exclusion produces slightly smaller ATMEs (Table S15). In the full-control specification, the two Polish cross-ideology estimates are no longer statistically significant, as are the same two South Korean estimates that were not significant in the judicial-item leave-out analysis. However, all estimates remain positive, and in the basic-control specification

⁸Note that these analyses were not preregistered.

all twelve country-scenario tests remain statistically significant. Overall, these robustness checks suggest that the core finding is not reducible to any single overlapping item, nor to the direct inclusion of the three scale items closest to the institutional domains manipulated in the conjoint.

6. Conclusion

This paper asked whether political culture helps explain democratic choice under backsliding pressures, and if so, which of its components matter most. By systematically comparing six measures spanning four major dimensions of democratic political culture, we find that several democratic orientations are associated with greater resistance to anti-democratic candidates in at least some contexts, but not equally so. Support for liberal democracy (Claassen et al. 2025) stands out as the most robust and consistent predictor, while democracy-autocracy preference, political tolerance, and emancipative values show more uneven evidence, and institutional trust appears to have little bearing on democratic choice. Our findings therefore challenge claims that political culture is irrelevant or assumptions that all aspects of political culture matter; instead, some democratic orientations are much more behaviorally consequential than others.

This pattern of results has theoretical implications for how political culture operates to protect democracy. Support for liberal democracy is the measure most closely aligned with the outcome of interest: it asks whether citizens endorse the liberal-democratic institutions and procedures that anti-democratic candidates seek to weaken. This theoretical proximity may help explain why the measure is most consistently associated with citizens' expressed intentions to vote against anti-democratic candidates. The overlap-removal analyses further show that this pattern is not reducible to the direct inclusion of the three scale items closest to the institutional domains manipulated in the conjoint, although some country-specific estimates weaken under the most demanding specification.

Democracy-autocracy preference is also directly relevant to pro- vs. anti-democratic candidate choice, but remains a more abstract measure. It is associated with pro-democratic choice in several tests, especially in the basic-control specifications, but its association is less consistent

once support for liberal democracy and the other political-culture measures are included.

The null results for institutional trust are also revealing. Institutional trust is often treated as a form of diffuse system support, but it is not associated with resistance to anti-democratic candidates in our data. This does not appear to be a simple measurement problem, since the trust scale is highly reliable in all three countries. Rather, institutional trust may be an ambivalent orientation in systems facing democratic backsliding: trusting citizens may view political institutions as legitimate, but trust may also involve a relatively uncritical acceptance of the status quo.

Socio-political values are the most theoretically distant of our political-culture measures from pro-democratic choice, since they concern authority, autonomy, conformity, and social equality rather than democratic institutions as such. The emancipative-values result is especially notable because this measure includes a subindex focused on gender equality, raising the possibility that its association with pro-democratic choice simply reflects agreement with socially liberal gender-policy positions. The gender-policy cross-pressure test provides a demanding check on this interpretation by isolating cases in which the pro-democratic candidate is farther from the respondent's own gender-policy position than the anti-democratic candidate. Yet in the United States, and in South Korea under some specifications, emancipative values remain positively associated with pro-democratic choice even in this setting.

The results also speak to an important ambiguity in how we interpret findings from such studies of pro- vs anti-democratic candidate choice, relating to predicted levels vs. marginal effects (see also Frederiksen 2024). A more pessimistic interpretation focuses on predicted levels of support for democratic and undemocratic candidates. From this perspective, our results show that partisan incentives remain powerful: in Poland and South Korea especially, predicted support for pro-democratic out-party candidates often remains below 50 percent, even among respondents with high levels of democratic support or other pro-democratic orientations. In other words, high levels of democratic support do not routinely produce majority support for pro-democratic out-party candidates in those samples. A more optimistic interpretation focuses instead on marginal effects: whether democratic orientations are associated with greater support for pro-democratic candidates,

even across party lines. On this criterion, our findings are more encouraging. Democratic orientations may not be sufficient to create a pro-democratic majority in the face of countervailing partisan incentives, but they do appear to make tolerance of anti-democratic candidates less likely.

It is important to note that our inferences remain observational with respect to political culture itself. Orientations such as political tolerance, emancipative values, or support for liberal democracy cannot easily be experimentally manipulated in the way candidate profiles can be. As a result, the relationships we identify should be interpreted as associations rather than causal effects of political culture per se. Even so, the tests we implement are demanding: they adjust for partisanship, ideology, and the remaining culture measures; they probe behavior under cross-pressured conditions; and they are examined across three democracies facing different types of backsliding pressure. What they suggest, in the end, is that democratic resilience at the ballot box is associated with citizens' democratic orientations, especially whether they support the institutions and procedures that constitute liberal democracy.

Appendix A. AAPOR-Required Disclosure Elements

Data source

The data source is an original survey of residents of the United States, Poland, and South Korea aged 18 and over. The survey was designed by the author and fielded by Savanta.

Data collection strategy

Data were collected using self-administered online surveys.

Research sponsor and conductor

The research is funded by the Leverhulme Trust through a Philip Leverhulme Prize awarded to the author. There is no sponsor. The surveys were fielded by Savanta.

Measurement tools/instruments

The conjoint treatments and outcome variable are reported in the main text. The questions and response options used to measure political culture are reported in the supplementary materials, section 1, control-variable definitions in section 3, and questionnaire order in section 4

Population under study

The target populations were adults aged 18 years or older and resident in the United States, Poland, and South Korea.

Methods used to generate and recruit the sample

Savanta recruited respondents for non-probability online survey samples from their panels. The samples were recruited using quota sampling on age group and gender, with a target of approximately 2,000 respondents per country. The supplementary materials, Tables S1–S3, report age, gender, and regional comparisons with census benchmarks showing that the samples correspond broadly with available age and gender population shares from national administrative data sources, although older respondents (60+) are somewhat less represented in our Polish and Korean samples than their population shares (25% vs 33-34%).

Method and mode of data collection

All surveys were conducted online. An English questionnaire was used in the US survey, a Polish questionnaire used in the Polish survey, and a Korean questionnaire used in the South Korean survey.

Dates of data collection

Data were collected from 5-19 September 2025.

Sample sizes and discussion of the precision of the results

The final analytic samples used in the main overall analyses are 1,983 respondents in the United States, 2,001 respondents in South Korea, and 1,967 respondents in Poland, for a pooled sample of 5,951 respondents. Because the surveys used non-probability samples, no design-based margins of sampling error are reported.

Whether and how the data were weighted

The analyses are unweighted. Because the surveys use non-probability samples, no design weights were created or supplied by the survey vendor.

How the data were processed and procedures to ensure data quality

Each survey included three attention checks. Respondents who failed any attention check were screened out by the survey vendor, and their data were not retained. As specified in the preregistration, the author further excluded respondents who completed the questionnaire in less than 40 percent of the median completion time in their country. This screen removed 33 cases in the United States, 27 cases in South Korea, and 43 cases in Poland. Refusals were only permitted for two items: gender and income – these were coded as separate categories rather than as missing values. “Don’t know” responses were not permitted. No other item-missing responses remained in the analytic variables.

Panel description

Savanta recruited respondents through their online survey-panel sources.

Interviewer details

There were no interviewers. The surveys were self-administered.

Screening criteria and process

Eligibility was restricted to people aged 18 years or older, resident in each country, and literate in the respective language used. During fieldwork, Savanta also implemented the age and gender quotas and the attention-check screening described above.

Study stimuli

The study stimuli consisted of hypothetical candidate profiles as part of a conjoint experiment. The exact treatment wording is reported in the main text.

Dispositions or response or participation rates

Because the surveys used non-probability online samples, a response rate cannot be computed. The vendor did not provide the full disposition counts needed to calculate a cooperation rate.

Sample sizes

Sample sizes differ across analyses because the cross-party and cross-ideology tests are restricted to respondent-profile pairs that meet the relevant preregistered conditions, e.g., in-party vs out-party. The main cross-party analyses use 1,077 respondents in the United States, 874 respondents in South Korea, and 1,271 respondents in Poland. The cross-ideology analyses use 1,802 respondents in the United States, 1,783 respondents in South Korea, and 1,656 respondents in Poland for redistribution, and 1,609 respondents in the United States, 1,543 respondents in South Korea, and 1,486 respondents in Poland for gender policy.

Measurement and model specification

The paper, supplementary materials, and replication files provide the information needed to replicate the construction of the political-culture scales and run the analyses. The main analyses estimate average treatment moderation effects and linear probability models of choosing the pro-democratic candidate. Models adjust for demographic and political covariates, and standard errors

are clustered by respondent to account for the repeated conjoint tasks completed by each respondent.

General statement acknowledging limitations of the design and data collection

The surveys are non-probability online samples based on gender and age quotas and should not be interpreted as probability samples of the three national adult populations. In addition, while candidate attributes in the conjoint experiment are randomized, respondent political-culture orientations are observed rather than experimentally manipulated. Associations involving those orientations should therefore not be interpreted as causal effects of political culture itself.

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