

Does support for democracy increase losers' consent?

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Abstract

Regime legitimacy and survival rely on citizens' consent to election results, even when these results are unfavorable. Theories posit that individuals with pro-democratic attitudes are more accepting of electoral losses. We test this assumption by analyzing the empirical relationship between support for democratic principles, such as universal suffrage, and electoral consent to randomly generated, hypothetical but plausible electoral outcomes. Using data from a representative sample of Germans, we find a negative correlation between the two variables. Furthermore, those with the strongest democratic convictions are those most influenced in their consent by partisan preferences. Part of the explanation stems from reactions to the far-right, anti-democratic party Alternative for Germany, as many respondents strongly dislike this party and are unwilling to consent to outcomes in which it performs well. However, even among other respondents, democratic support does not correlate positively with losers' consent.

Keywords

electoral consent, survey, Germany, protest, democracy

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Introduction

Accepting defeat is a fundamental aspect of democracy. Democratic theory has long stressed that the peaceful transfer of power from one government to another is essential for democracy to endure (Dahl, 1971; Mill, 1861; Przeworski, 1991). Political actors and ordinary citizens need to be committed to consenting to election results, even when unfavorable. A key source of regime legitimacy and survival is that losers accept their defeat and continue to participate in the selection of leaders (Anderson et al., 2005; Nadeau and Blais, 1993; Norris, 1999). This acceptance demonstrates that democratic institutions are functioning as intended, serving the broader interests of society rather than catering to specific partisan groups (Rawls, 1971).

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In this paper, we examine whether citizens who support democracy are more consenting to electoral outcomes and are less affected by the performance of their most liked and disliked parties in their consent. Given the centrality of electoral consent in the scholarship on democracy, we expect that the acceptance of loss is generally high among the strongest democratic supporters, even when they lose. An important exception should be when an anti-democratic party that threatens regime survival wins. In those situations, these strong democratic supporters may reject the electoral results to save democracy.

We test these arguments with a survey-based experiment involving 5000 voting-eligible respondents in Germany. We choose Germany because, despite being a country representative of established democracies in terms of (solid) democratic institutions (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019), the regime is currently under siege as in many countries around the world today. The Alternative for Germany (AfD), a populist party currently under investigation by Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution due to its positions on minority groups, notably Muslim citizens,¹ is achieving unprecedented levels of success at the national level and is set to become a major player in many regions. In reaction, massive protests erupted around the country in 2024 to question the authorization of the party to continue competing in elections.² Such mobilization echoes the "militant democracy" legal framework in Germany, where illiberal laws are sometimes adopted to prevent the country from sliding into autocracy (Müller, 2012).

Although emblematic, the German case is not unique. Many other European countries like France, Poland, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Austria, Denmark, and Finland are facing a similar threat posed by a strong far-right party with dubious commitment to democracy. Many citizens and pundits are concerned that these countries may follow the route of democratic recession like in Orbán's Hungary. In other parts of the world, this trend is exemplified by figures like Trump and Bolsonaro, whose supporters' refusal to accept electoral defeat highlights the risk of democratic backsliding. Hence, the question of the acceptance of election outcomes is both timely and critical for understanding the very survival of democratic systems.

In this paper, we directly measure how much citizens accept concrete election outcomes in the form of hypothetical yet plausible vignettes. We ask these citizens to report how much they would accept/reject these electoral outcomes, and their willingness to participate in a protest contesting them. We then examine whether the underlying favorable attitude toward democracy (asked, in the survey, before the electoral outcome vignettes), measured through a new battery of survey questions that include items related to freedom of association, expression, and universal suffrage, is linked to electoral consent. We find, contrary to our pre-registered hypotheses, that the relationship between democratic support and electoral consent is *negative*, so that it is those respondents whose score is the highest on the battery of questions measuring their commitment to democracy that show the lowest levels of electoral consent. The strongest democracy's supporters are also those who are the most affected by the performance of their most (dis)liked party at the government level so that they are less likely to consent to an unfavorable electoral outcome.

Furthermore, we find that the electoral performance of the AfD plays an important role in this unexpected result. It is indeed the party that is the most hated among respondents, especially among those with the strongest democratic convictions. Many of them are not consenting to situations in which this party performs well at the government level, presumably to save the country from democratic backsliding.³ The flip side is equally true as the most pro-democratic supporters of the AfD are less likely to consent to outcomes in

which the party that they dislike most (i.e. the Greens) wins. Nonetheless, we also find that this is not the whole story, as many pro-democracy respondents have different partisan preferences. Those among them whose most disliked party is a party other than the AfD are *not* more willing to accept the outcomes where that most disliked party wins.

This finding contributes to the scholarship about losers' consent as a core element of democratic commitment (Anderson et al., 2005; Przeworski, 1991). Contrasting with studies showing that democracy's strongest supporters are more predisposed toward electoral consent when the question is asked in abstraction of partisan considerations (e.g. Claassen et al., 2025), we find that the results are opposite when we ask them to evaluate concrete electoral outcomes involving real political parties. This suggests that citizens with strong democratic convictions have strong opinions about which parties are good and bad for democracy, and they are willing to renounce to the imperative of losers' consent.

Electoral consent and support for democracy

A broad range of ideas and principles shape the organization and functioning of governance. Two key principles related to democracy are particularly pertinent for our work. First, that the perceived legitimacy of election outcomes should depend on whether elections are conducted freely and fairly, not who wins or loses the election (Birch, 2011). This principle is grounded in the idea that democratic legitimacy arises from adherence to established procedures, fairness, transparency, and integrity of the electoral process rather than the specific outcomes of elections (Dahl, 1989). When elections are conducted fairly, with impartial oversight and adherence to the rule of law, citizens should view the results as legitimate, regardless of whether their preferred candidate or party wins or not (Esaïasson et al., 2019; Werner and Marien, 2022).

A second, and related, principle is that prior baseline *diffuse* support for democracy among eventual losers should reduce the negative impact of losing on consenting to an electoral outcome. This theoretical perspective is based on Easton's (1975) classic distinction between diffuse and specific support for democracy, where the former, contrary to the latter, is a generalized attachment to democratic institutions for their own sake, irrespective of evaluations of the government in place. This "principled nature of democratic support" has been shown to remain relatively impervious to changes in government effectiveness (Claassen and Magalhães, 2022). Thus, individuals with a strong commitment to democratic principles should be more likely to accept an election outcome, even when their preferred party loses. In other words, citizens with strong democratic convictions are assumed to prioritize the integrity of the process over partisan success.

These key principles have been challenged on two grounds. First, the winner–loser gap literature examines the disparity in satisfaction with democracy between those who perceive themselves as winners and losers in electoral contests. Winners, whose preferred candidates or parties succeed, exhibit higher levels of political satisfaction, trust in institutions, and perceptions of legitimacy compared to losers (Anderson et al., 2005; Esaïasson, 2011; Kern et al., 2024; Norris, 2014).

Second, recent research indicates that citizens' dedication to democratic principles and institutions is often trumped by their partisan loyalties. Although many voters claim to support democracy in theory, they sometimes condone violations of fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, or electoral integrity when their favored leaders are in office. When their preferred politicians hold power, these voters tolerate or even support decisions with

autocratic tendencies (Gidengil et al., 2022; Graham and Svolik, 2020; Svolik, 2023). Cohen et al. (2023), for example, show that following Bolsonaro's victory in 2018, his supporters demonstrated a renewed enthusiasm for the current political system, yet his triumph also strengthened their backing of authoritarian institutional changes that would advantage their newly elected leader. Similarly, Monsiváis-Carrillo (2022) reports that in Mexico partisan voters privilege their political allegiances when judging the regime's performance and accommodate their views to reflect those of the government.

We build upon this theoretical background to formulate our pre-registered hypotheses.

Hypotheses

In line with the vast literature on the winner–loser gap (e.g. Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Blais et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2012), we expect electoral consent to be heavily influenced by partisan preferences. This literature shows that consent is significantly shaped by the performance of the most liked parties. According to this perspective, the more seats citizens' most preferred party secures in parliament and government, the more acceptable they find the election outcome. This increased acceptance stems from a sense of representation and validation of their political preferences, which reinforces their confidence in the democratic process (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Singh, 2014). In addition, winning boosts satisfaction with democracy because a preferred party's victory makes it more likely that one's policy preferences will be realized (Ezrow and Xezonakis, 2011). Consequently, winning citizens should be less likely to engage in protests contesting the election results, as they feel their interests are adequately represented in the legislative or executive body (Anderson and Mendes, 2006).

In parallel, another literature suggests that in an era of growing polarization negative partisanship has pervasive and have far-reaching consequences (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Anderson et al., 2022; Ridge, 2022). Citizens' electoral consent is thus likely to be affected by the performance of their most disliked or out-group party. An outcome in which this party gains a substantial number of seats in parliament or government should be perceived as a threat to their political values and preferences and should thus heighten the likelihood of participating in a protest against that outcome. Hence, our first hypothesis reads as follows:⁴

Hypothesis 1: The better (worse) the most liked (disliked) party *performs*, the more acceptable the electoral outcome is, and the less likely respondents are to participate in a protest contesting it.

Importantly, for the reasons presented in the previous section, we expect the acceptance of electoral outcomes and the propensity to participate in protests to depend on individuals' underlying commitment to democratic principles. This commitment forms the bedrock of their political beliefs and shapes how they interpret and react to election results. Individuals who strongly support democratic cornerstones such as universal suffrage, press freedom, and the rule of law when endangered should be more likely to accept election outcomes because of their commitment to democratic rules. Their support for democratic institutions should guarantee their acceptance of election results, even those that they dislike, and should reduce the likelihood of contesting outcomes through protests. Conversely, individuals with a weaker commitment to democracy harbor doubts about the legitimacy of electoral processes to start with, and this is reinforced by them

losing the election. This skepticism leads to a greater willingness to participate in protests as a form of expressing dissent. Hence, we expect:

Hypothesis 2: Those who support democracy are generally more accepting of electoral outcomes and are less likely to participate in a protest contesting them.

We also seek to determine which electoral outcomes are accepted and less likely to be contested by those who score high on support for democracy. For the reasons mentioned in the previous section, we expect this group to be less reactive to the performance of their most liked and disliked parties because they respect the democratic process regardless of whether their most liked or disliked parties win or lose. Consequently, they should be less reactive to the success or failure of the parties they like or dislike, as their primary concern is upholding democratic norms rather than partisan victory. Hence, our next hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 3: The more one supports democracy, the more they generally accept an outcome where their most liked (disliked) party performs badly (well) and the less likely they are to participate in a protest contesting such outcome.

The final hypothesis pertains to how those who score high on support for democracy should react to specific electoral outcomes in which a non-democratic party performs well. Like in many other established democracies, one party in Germany, the AfD, has been criticized for its lack of commitment to democracy. In the V-Party data set (Coppedge et al., 2024), the party scores above 0.5 on the 0–1 index of anti-pluralism. By means of comparisons, all other German parties score lower than 0.1. For this reason, we expect respondents who score high on the support for democracy index to be less likely to accept, and more likely to contest, electoral outcomes in which the AfD performs well.⁵ This echoes the large protests that were taking place in Germany at the time of the survey, where protesters affirmed their support for democracy and took a stance against the AfD.

Hypothesis 4: The more one supports democracy, the less they accept an outcome where the AfD performs well and the more likely they are to participate in a protest contesting it.

Data and methods

In February 2024, the survey company Dynata conducted a web-based survey that lasted 7.5 min on average, with 5000 German citizens from their panel.⁶ This sample is made representative of the population of the country using quotas on age, gender, region (hard quotas), and education (soft quotas). The information regarding the representativeness of the sample can be found in Supplemental Appendix 1. The questionnaire contained socio-demographic questions, as well as questions related to the respondents' partisan preferences, their support for democracy, and their evaluations of vignettes of electoral outcomes.

These vignette questions are at the center of the project. We showed fictitious yet plausible outcomes of a Bundestag election to respondents before asking them what they think of it. This outcome contained a distribution of parliamentary seats among the seven parties that are likely to pass the representation threshold of 5% of the votes in the

Imagine an election produces the following German Bundestag:
- CDU/CSU: 39% of seats
- AfD: 20% of seats
- SPD: 7% of seats
- Greens: 18% of seats
- FDP: 6% of seats
- BSW: 5% of seats
- The Left: 5% of seats
After the election there is a governing coalition between the CDU and the Greens:
- CDU/CSU: 68% of cabinet seats
- Greens: 32% of cabinet seats
The CDU/CSU has the Chancellorship.

Figure 1. Example of electoral outcome.

proportional tier of the electoral system: Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), AfD, Social Democratic Party (SPD), Alliance 90/The Greens (Greens), Free Democratic Party (FDP), Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), and The Left. It also showed which of the parties are in government and with how many cabinet seats, and which one holds the Chancellorship.⁷ We decided to present the full electoral outcome to respondents, including the composition of the government, since the government is ultimately the main decision-making body for public policy. Figure 1 presents an example of the survey vignette.⁸

To create a variety of plausible electoral outcomes, we randomly generated them within some constraints.⁹ First, each party received a random percentage of parliamentary seats based on their aggregated vote intentions according to last five national polls ± 10 percentage points, with a total of 100%. Due to Germany's 5% vote threshold, parties that were randomly assigned a seat share between 1% and 4% received zero seats.¹⁰ The mean vote intentions in these polls were: 31% for the CDU/CSU, 21% for the AfD, 16% for the SPD, 1% for the Greens, 8% for the BSW, 6% for the FDP, and 5% for the Left.

Second, the government was formed by randomly selecting parties that together hold at least 51% of parliamentary seats, with unnecessary parties being excluded to ensure a minimal-winning governing coalition, which is the most frequent type of government in established democracies (Clark et al., 2024). Finally, cabinet seats were allocated proportionally to the number of parliamentary seats each party holds, following Gamson's law, with a total of 100%, and the Chancellorship was given to the party with the most parliamentary seats within the government, or randomly in case of a tie.

The advantage of random generation in this context is that it allows us to cover a wide range of potential electoral outcomes.¹¹ Seventy-two different combinations of coalitions appeared on the respondents' screens, 49% of which had the CDU/CSU as senior partner and Chancellor. On average, the effective number of parties in parliament is 5.55 and the effective number of parties in government is 3.25. Importantly, although the seat distribution is made realistic, the possibility that any combination of parties, including those far apart ideologically, can form a coalition together as soon as they jointly have at least 51% of the parliamentary seats may lead to less plausible outcomes. For example, although the Chancellorship is almost always held by one of

the three largest parties (95% of electoral outcomes), exceptionally, a small party like the FDP ends up holding it (0.3%). We nonetheless preferred to adopt an agnostic approach to coalition formations in the main analysis. We control for ideological polarization of the government to account for this.

After exposing respondents to a randomly generated outcome, we asked them questions aimed at capturing their degree of consent with such an outcome. Following the theoretical scholarship on the topic, we operationalize consent both in terms of attitudes and behavior. Consent is indeed conceived both as an acceptance of authority grounded in perceptions of fairness, and an observable willingness to comply and exercise forbearance (Levi, 1997). We thus first asked respondents how much they reject/accept the electoral outcome (attitudinal variable). The exact wording in English is “suppose that this is the electoral outcome. Would you personally find this electoral outcome acceptable or unacceptable?”¹² The term “accept” is a synonym of “consent” according to the Cambridge Dictionary. It is also a word that is widely used in the public to discuss the matter at hand. For example, in the electoral debate between the two 2024 US presidential candidates, the journalist Dana Bash asked Donald Trump whether he would *accept* the result of the election if he loses.¹³

Second, we asked respondents whether they would participate in a protest contesting this electoral outcome (behavioral variable). This question echoes the protests organized by Trump’s and Bolsonaro’s supporters after their preferred candidate lost the election, as well as more peaceful protests that may arise following the announcement of electoral results in other contexts. However, it does not capture participation in protests that precede elections and that may realistically still affect electoral outcomes, such as the large-scale mobilizations that took place between the two rounds of the 2002 French presidential election and contributed to mobilizing voters against far-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round (Lagios et al., 2025).

Importantly, we did not directly probe respondents’ motivations for rejecting or contesting a given electoral outcome. We acknowledge that some respondents may have reported rejecting the outcome simply because they were dissatisfied with the result, without necessarily questioning its democratic legitimacy. This consideration partly motivated the inclusion of the second question on protest participation. Meanwhile, it is also possible that some respondents declared a willingness to participate in a protest without intending to contest the democratic legitimacy of the electoral outcome. Nevertheless, we argue that this behavioral measure remains substantively meaningful. In real-world settings, protest participants rarely know in advance what the consequences of their actions will be, including whether protests will remain peaceful or escalate into more confrontational or even violent forms of contestation, which would de facto undermine democratic legitimacy. We nonetheless acknowledge that our survey lacks mechanisms to probe the motivations underlying the rejection of the electoral outcome, which represents a limitation of the present study, and we encourage future research to explore this question.

In both instances of consent questions, the response scale ranged between 0 (minimum acceptance/minimum likelihood of participating in the protest) and 10 (maximum acceptance/maximum probability of participating in the protest). Note that the question about protest was only asked to respondents that answer a number strictly below 5 in the question about acceptance, as it makes little sense to protest an electoral outcome that is deemed acceptable. We thus assigned the value 0 to the protest variable for those acceptable outcomes. We repeated the vignette questions five times, which is well below the

threshold where the answers start becoming meaningless due to fatigue and satisficing (Bansak et al., 2018). Each time a new electoral outcome was randomly generated (conditional on the constraints above) and the two questions were asked again. As a robustness test, we reproduce our analyses by reducing the sample to the first iteration.

To test Hypothesis 1, we first identify, for each respondent, their most liked and most disliked parties. To do so, we relied on a question that asked them how much they liked each of the seven parties included in the electoral outcome on a scale from 0 to 10. The most liked party is the party with the highest score, and the most disliked party is the party with the lowest score. In case of ties, respondents were asked to select a single most liked and most disliked party among the tied parties.¹⁴ Then, we operationalize the performance of these parties by looking at their parliamentary seat share, their cabinet seat share, and whether they have the Chancellorship.

To measure support for democracy, we rely on a new battery of questions developed by Claassen et al. (2025), which captures respondents' reactions to a series of situations where democracy is endangered. The battery covers the main dimensions of democracy and includes questions about government censoring the media, a system with a single political party, universal suffrage, government bending electoral rules to ensure its re-election, court rulings being ignored, parliamentary procedures being ignored, and bending the rule of law to limit freedom of association (see Supplemental Appendix 3 for full question wording in English and German). We recode the answers to these questions so that a high value means a positive support for democracy and then calculate the sum of the responses to create an index of support for democracy that we then standardize between 0 and 1. These answers capture a single latent trait of democratic support. A factor analysis shows that they all load at 0.65 or more into a single factor that has an eigenvalue of 3.7. As a matter of comparison, the second factor is at 0.2. Cronbach's alpha is at 0.89. Descriptive statistics for all variables are available in Supplemental Appendix 4.

To test these hypotheses, we create a data set in which each line is a dyad of respondent and electoral outcome. Given that the core question was repeated five times, the number of observations in our study is 26,850. However, due to a bug in the survey platform, a handful of observations are unusable (less than 0.5%). We thus have $N=26,740$. To test Hypotheses 1 and 2, we estimate the following pre-registered OLS regression:

$$Y_{i,j} = \beta_0 + \beta_k W_{i,j} + \beta_k X_i + \beta_k Z_{i,j} + e_{i,j}$$

where Y is the attitude of respondent i to the electoral outcome j . In a first regression, Y is respondent i 's acceptance of the electoral outcome j , and in a second regression, Y is respondent i 's probability to contest this outcome. W is a vector of variables that capture the parliamentary seat shares of the most liked and disliked party (continuous), the cabinet seat share of the most liked and disliked party (continuous), and whether the most liked and disliked party has the Chancellorship (dummy).

X is a vector of variables at the respondent level that contains their socio-demographics: age (in years, continuous), gender (dummy with 1 for female), education level (categorical), and region (categorical). It also captures support for democracy from the aggregated indicator presented above.

Z is a vector of variables at the electoral outcome level. It is important to control for structural features of the outcomes, as we put constraints on the random generation of these outcomes to increase realism (see above), which then means that the structural

variables are not independent of the performance of parties. For example, the number of parties is on average one point smaller when the CDU/CSU is in government than when it is not. This vector of control variables includes: the effective number of parties in government and parliament (continuous), whether the largest party in terms of seats is in the governing coalition or not (dummy), the left-right ideological spread of the governing parties per Dalton's (2008) formula applied to the left-right positioning of the German parties according to the latest wave of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al., 2022), and the frequency of the governing coalitions in Germany since 1990 (continuous). Finally, β_0 is the constant and e is the error term clustered at the respondent i 's level. As per the pre-analysis plan, the hypotheses are considered confirmed if the relevant coefficient has the expected sign and is statistically significant at a level of $p < 0.05$ (two-sided).

To test Hypothesis 3, we estimate the following OLS regression, which was also pre-registered

$$Y_{i,j} = \beta_0 + \beta_{k1}W_{i,j} + \beta_{k2}X_i + \beta_{k3}Z_{i,j} + \beta_{k4}D_i * W_{i,j} + e_i$$

where the variables Y , as well as the vectors of variables W , X , and Z , are the same as in the regression above. The addition to this regression is an interaction term between the variable D (which is part of the vector of individual-level variable X capturing the degree of respondent i 's support for democracy) with the vector of variable W capturing the performance of their most liked and most disliked party.

Hypothesis 4 relates to the position of the AfD in the electoral outcome and how it moderates the patterns observed in the previous tests. We test Hypothesis 4 by re-estimating the regression designed to test Hypothesis 3 for three groups of respondents: those whose most disliked party is the AfD, those for whom this is the most liked party, and those whose most liked and disliked parties are not the AfD. We expect the negative relationship of the performance of the most disliked party in terms of cabinet seats¹⁵ to be stronger among supporters of democracy when this most disliked party is the AfD.

Finally, we conduct for each of these regressions a series of pre-registered robustness tests. First, we re-estimate the same regressions without the individual-level control variables. Second, we re-estimate the regressions with alternative measures of partisan preferences. We use answers to questions asking respondents to indicate vote intention (positive and negative) instead of preferences.¹⁶ Third, we re-estimate the regressions by reducing the sample to the first iteration of the scenario questions to test the possibility that respondents experience fatigue after some iterations. Fourth, we re-estimate the regressions without the scenarios in which the BSW is in government. The BSW being a very new party, evaluations of electoral outcomes in which this party holds a prominent position might not be meaningful. Fifth, we perform an alternative test of these hypotheses by removing from the sample respondents who have mild preferences in terms of most liked party. We only keep those for whom the most liked party is at least two points above the second most liked party.¹⁷ Sixth, we re-estimate the regressions after transforming the dependent variables into categorical variables: low acceptance/low contestation (between 0 and 3 on the original response scale), high acceptance/high contestation (between 7 and 10) and mid-level of acceptance/contestation (between 4 and 6). We then use multinomial logit regression form so that we do not make any assumption regarding the linearity of the categories of the dependent variable.

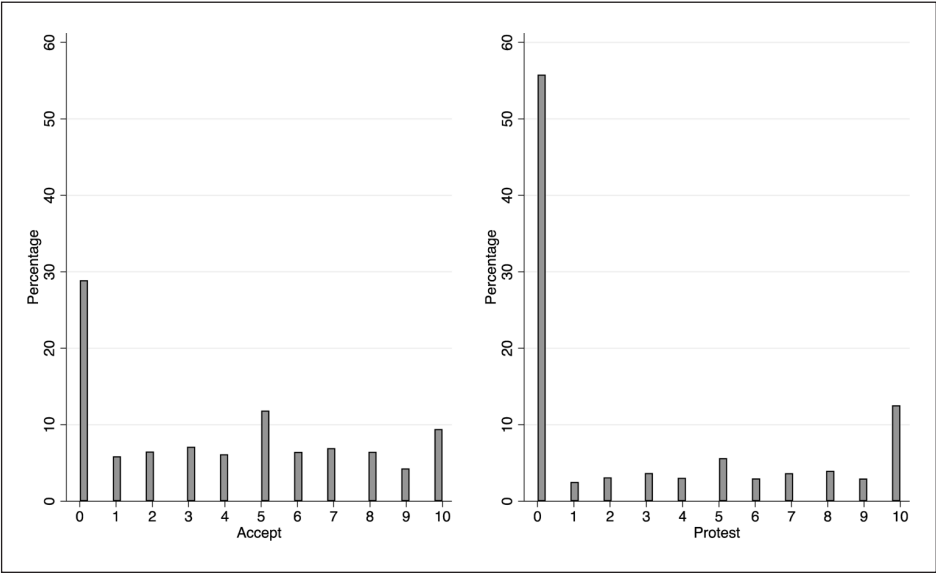


Figure 2. The distribution of electoral consent.

Findings

We start with the description of our independent and dependent variables. Figure 2 reports the distribution of the two electoral consent variables. In each case, this distribution is normal except that the two extreme values, 0 and 10, are largely over-represented, indicating that many respondents have strong opinions. For acceptability, 29% chose category 0, whereas only 9% chose category 10. In fact, a majority of electoral outcomes are not accepted, with 55% being evaluated below the midpoint. Consequently, the mean of the variable is 3.96 (standard deviation 3.46). This result suggests that electoral consent is generally low among Germans.

However, the distribution of the protest variable shows that most respondents are not willing to put this lack of acceptance into action, as 56% chose category 0 on this variable and “only” 13% chose category 10. The mean is thus quite low at 2.88 (standard deviation 3.80). Yet, there are still 23% of electoral outcomes against which Germans are willing to protest, that is, they choose a response above the midpoint of the scale. This is thus a real threat to electoral consent in the country.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of partisan preferences. It reveals that, unsurprisingly, the CDU/CSU and AfD are the two parties with the largest share of supporters (27% and 20%, respectively) followed by the SPD and the Greens (18% and 14%, respectively). Interestingly, the new BSW party is relatively popular as it has more supporters than the FDP and The Left (8% vs 7%). Most importantly perhaps, the AfD emerges as the most disliked party by far (53% of haters), followed by the Greens (27%). The proportion of haters of other parties remains small (not more than 6%).

Figure 3 shows the distribution of support for democracy, based on the battery of questions presented above. The figure shows this distribution for the full sample as well as in subgroups depending on most liked party. It reveals that Germans, just like citizens from other countries (Anderson et al., 2021; Claassen et al., 2025; Norris, 1999), vastly support

Table 1. The distribution of partisan preferences.

	Proportion of supporters	Proportion of haters
CDU/CSU	0.27	0.05
AfD	0.20	0.53
SPD	0.18	0.03
Greens	0.14	0.27
FDP	0.07	0.03
BSW	0.08	0.03
The Left	0.07	0.06

Note. Entries are proportion of respondents who report the highest (supporters) or lowest (haters) liking score for the party. In case of tie, they were asked to select a single most like or most disliked party in a follow-up question.

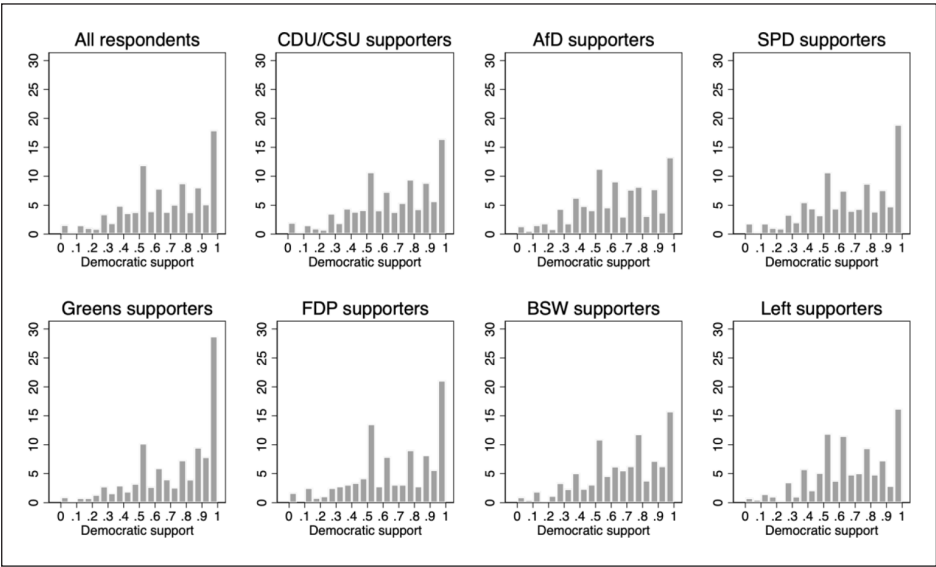


Figure 3. The distribution of democratic support.

democratic principles. Only 30% of the full sample score lower than 0.5 on the 0–1 scale, whereas 25% score higher than 0.8. The mean is 0.67 (standard deviation 0.25).

There are some interesting differences between partisan groups. On the one hand, the most pro-democracy are the supporters of the Greens. Only 25% of them score lower than 0.5 on the 0–1 scale, and more than 35% score higher than 0.8. The average support for democracy in this group is 0.73 (standard deviation is 0.26). On the other hand, the most “anti-democratic” are unsurprisingly the AfD supporters. More than 35% of them score lower than 0.5 on the 0–1 scale, and less than 20% score higher than 0.8. However, the mean democratic support remains large among AfD supporters, with a mean of 0.63 (standard deviation is 0.25). Like in other Western European countries, supporters of populist and radical right parties are generally favorable to democratic principles, especially those related to institutions that empower ordinary citizens (Engler et al., 2023; Landwehr and Steiner, 2017; Werner and Jacobs, 2022; Zaslove and Meijers, 2024). All

Table 2. Electoral outcomes with the highest/lowest levels of consent.

Highest accept		
Chancellor	Junior partners	Mean accept
CDU/CSU	SPD, FDP	5.54
CDU/CSU	BSW, The Left	5.43
CDU/CSU	SPD, Greens	5.30
CDU/CSU	SPD, BSW	5.28
CDU/CSU	SPD, FDP, The Left	5.17
Lowest accept		
Chancellor	Junior partners	Mean accept
AfD	Greens, FDP, The Left	2.80
AfD	Greens, FDP, BSW	2.96
AfD	SPD, Greens, BSW	3.00
AfD	SPD, Greens, The Left	3.01
AfD	SPD, Greens, FDP, BSW	3.03
Highest protest		
Chancellor	Junior partners	Mean protest
AfD	SPD, Greens, FDP, BSW	4.03
AfD	Greens, FDP, The Left	4.02
AfD	Greens, BSW, The Left	3.98
AfD	Greens, FDP, BSW, The Left	3.95
AfD	SPD, FDP, The Left	3.89
Lowest protest		
Chancellor	Junior partners	Mean protest
CDU/CSU	BSW, The Left	1.27
CDU/CSU	SPD, FDP	1.48
CDU/CSU	Greens, FDP	1.48
CDU/CSU	SPD, FDP, The Left	1.52
CDU/CSU	SPD, BSW	1.54

Note. Entries are the mean acceptance and likelihood to protest among all iterations of the electoral outcome. We only consider those outcomes that appear at least 100 times in our data.

the other parties have supporters that are between these two extremes, with some groups being a little more democratic than others, but the difference is not pronounced. For example, the second most democratic group is the FDP supporters, who score 0.68 on average, whereas the second to last democratic group is the supporters from The Left, who score 0.66 on average.

Table 2 shows the electoral outcomes, defined by the partisan composition of the coalition, for which the electoral consent is highest and lowest. We only consider those that appear more than 100 times in our data. It reveals that respondents are more likely to accept and less likely to protest against outcomes where the CDU/CSU has the Chancellorship and where the AfD is absent from the governing coalition. By contrast, the lowest levels of consent are observed in outcomes where the AfD has the

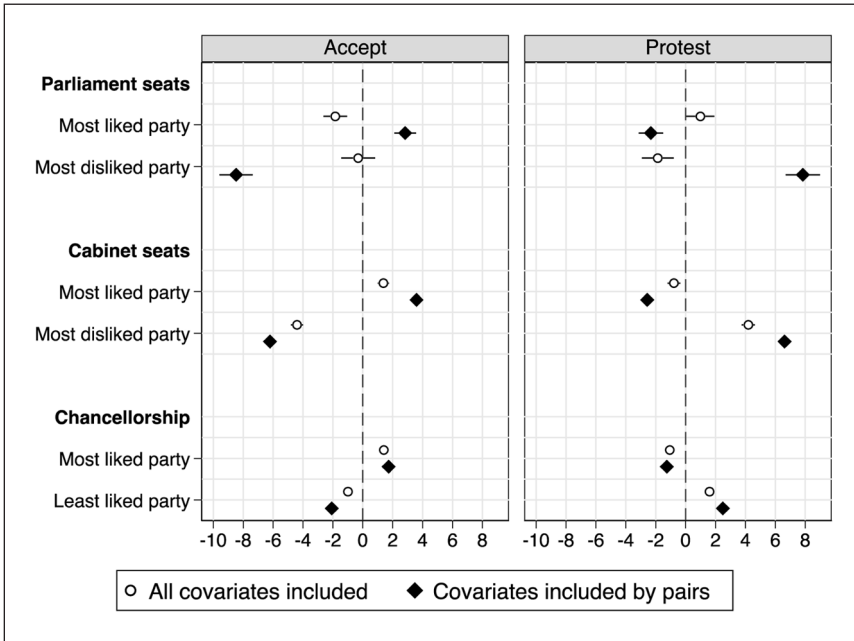


Figure 4. Effect of performance of most (dis)liked party on electoral consent.

Note. Entries are coefficient estimates from the regressions that include the performance indicators by pair (parliamentary seat share of most liked and most disliked parties, then cabinet seat share of most liked and disliked parties, then whether the Chancellor is for the most liked and disliked party), and the coefficient estimates from the regressions that include all performance indicators at the same time. Horizontal bars are 95% confidence intervals. All regressions include control variables at the outcome level (effective number of parties in government, effective number of parties in parliament, polarization of parties in government, frequency of governing coalition since 1990, total seat share of government) and individual level (age, gender, education, region, and democratic support). Full results are available in Supplemental Appendix 5.

Chancellorship. Note that respondents also seem to be more willing to consent to coalitions with fewer parties.

Moving to the multivariate analysis, Figure 4 shows the results of the OLS regression presented above that seeks to test Hypothesis 1 by estimating the effect the performance indicators of the most liked and disliked party in the electoral outcome, in terms of parliamentary and cabinet seats, as well as Chancellorship, on electoral consent. We add to this regression one (not pre-registered) in which we only include the covariates of interest by pairs: parliamentary seat shares of most liked and disliked party first, then cabinet seat shares of most liked and disliked party, and finally whether the most liked and disliked parties are in government. We do this as the performance indicators of most liked party and those of the most disliked party are mechanically correlated by design, which might distort the results. In the data, this correlation goes up to 0.8.

The figure shows that Hypothesis 1 is largely confirmed: respondents accept more and protest less at the electoral outcomes in which their most liked party performs well in terms of cabinet seats and Chancellorship, and where their most disliked party performs badly on the same indicators. These effects are consistently statistically significant at a level of $p < 0.01$. The results are less conclusive when party performance is calculated with parliamentary seat share. Whereas the effect goes in the expected direction (positive for the most liked party and negative for the most disliked party) when

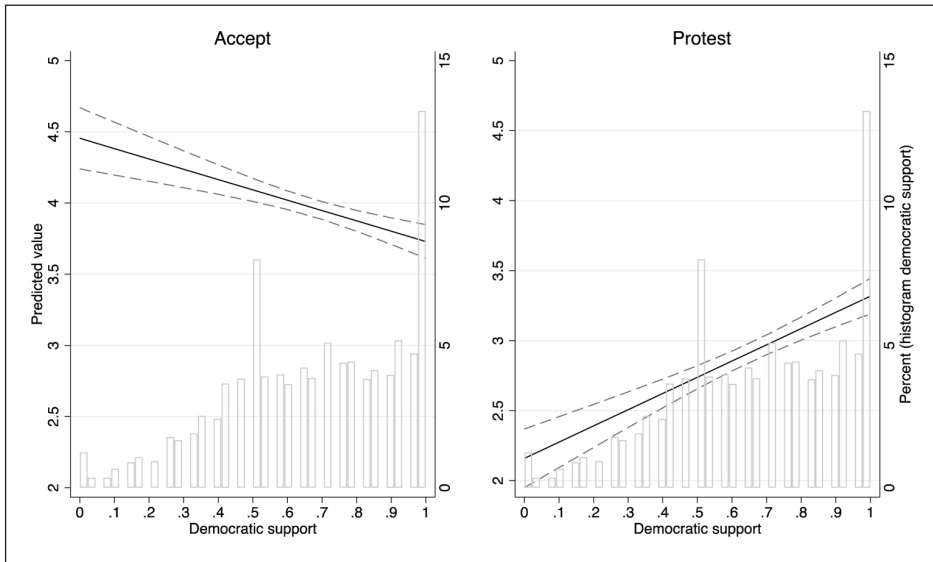


Figure 5. Electoral consent as a function of democratic support.

Note. Entries are the predicted values of the dependent variables (accept and protest) as democratic support varies from its minimum to maximum. Dashed lines are the 95% confidence intervals. Overlaid histogram is the one of democratic support. The regressions include control variables at the outcome level (effective number of parties in government, effective number of parties in parliament, polarization of parties in government, frequency of governing coalition since 1990, total seat share of government) and individual level (age, gender, education, region and all performance indicators of most liked and disliked parties). Full results are available in Supplemental Appendix 6.

the two variables are included in pairs, the coefficients lose statistical significance or change signs when it is included in combination with all other covariates. This result thus confirms previous studies that find that when they evaluate electoral outcomes, respondents are more attentive to what is happening at the government rather than parliamentary level (Blais et al., 2023).

The figure shows that the effects are substantial. When respondents' favorite party has Chancellorship, they are more acceptant of the electoral outcome by about 2 points on the 0–10 scale, and less likely to protest it by the same margin. Cabinet seat share has a similarly large impact on electoral consent: when the favorite party goes from 0% to 38% of the cabinet seats (i.e. an increase corresponding to two standard deviations in the variable), that increases acceptance and decreases the likelihood of protest by half a point or even a full point on the 0–10 scale. Interestingly, the size of the effect of the performance of the most disliked party is either similar (Chancellorship) or larger (cabinet seat shares) compared to the one of the most liked parties. When the most disliked party goes from 0% to 38% in cabinet seats, the acceptance of the electoral outcome decreases, and the likelihood of protesting it increases, by 1.5 to 2 points. Equivalence tests show that these differences in the relative impact of the performance of the most liked and disliked parties are statistically significant at a level of $p < 0.01$. The robustness tests show that all these effects are robust to the alternative measures and specifications presented above (see Supplemental Appendix 5).¹⁸

Figure 5 presents the results related to Hypothesis 2. It reveals that respondents who show high levels of democratic support are *less* acceptant of the electoral outcomes, and

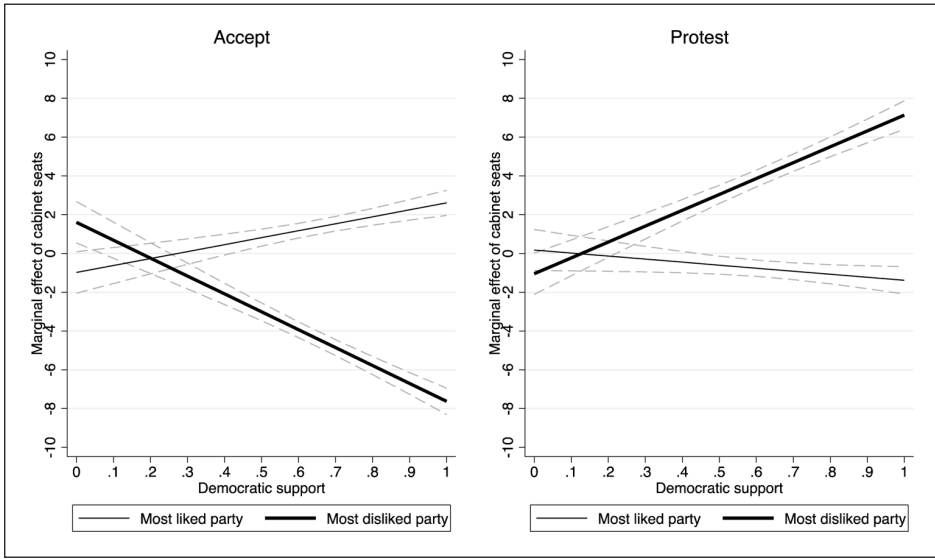


Figure 6. Marginal effect of cabinet seat share on electoral consent as democratic support increases.

Note. Entries are marginal effects of the performance of most liked and disliked parties (measured with cabinet seats) as democratic support varies from its minimum to its maximum. Dashed lines are the 95% confidence intervals. The regressions include an interaction term between democratic support and each performance indicator. They also include control variables at the outcome level (effective number of parties in government, effective number of parties in parliament, polarization of parties in government, frequency of governing coalition since 1990, total seat share of government) and individual level (age, gender, education, and region). Full results are available in Supplemental Appendix 7.

more likely to protest these outcomes (both statistically significant at a level of $p < 0.01$). This goes against our hypothesis that postulates the exact opposite. Furthermore, the magnitude of the association is not trivial, although smaller compared to the previous hypothesis: going from the minimum to the maximum on the democratic support variable decreases acceptance, and increases protest, by about 1 point in the 0–10 scale. Supplemental Appendix 6 shows that this result is robust across specifications.

Figure 6 presents the results of the second regression presented above that includes interaction terms between democratic support and the performance of parties in the electoral outcome. We focus here on cabinet seat share as the indicator of performance, as it has the strongest effect on electoral consent (see Figure 4 above). The figure shows that the effect of the cabinet seat share of most liked party on electoral consent, and even more so the effect of the cabinet seat share of most disliked party, becomes stronger as democratic support increases. The interaction term between democratic support and this performance indicator of the most disliked party is the only one that is consistently statistically significant at a level of $p < 0.01$ across all robustness tests (see Supplemental Appendix 7). The effect is symmetric for low and high levels of the dependent variables.

Figure 6 reveals that for both dependent variables the effects are close to 0 for respondents who show low levels of support for democracy, but they go up to ± 8 points for those who show high levels. For these respondents, acceptance of the electoral outcome decreases by 3 points, and the probability of protest increases by the same margin, when the cabinet seat share of the most disliked party goes from 0% to 39% (i.e. a two-standard-deviation

increase). This large effect goes against our hypothesis that pro-democratic respondents would be less affected by the performance of their most (dis)liked party in electoral consent than others. The results show the exact opposite.

Figure 7(a) and (b) shows the results related to the last hypothesis about the interaction between democratic support and the performance of the most disliked party, depending on whether that party is the AfD and whether the respondent supports the AfD. It reveals that the more democratic a respondent is the less they accept an electoral outcome in which their most disliked party has many cabinet seats in two situations: when that hated party is the AfD and when they themselves support the AfD. The interaction term between democratic support and the performance of the most disliked party is consistently statistically significant at a level of $p < 0.05$ in these two situations (see Supplemental Appendix 8).¹⁹

Outcome acceptance of the most pro-democracy respondents who hate the AfD decreases by 5 points on the 0–10 scale when that party goes from getting no cabinet seats to getting half of them (left panel of Figure 7(a)). A similar pattern emerges among AfD supporters, although the effect is “only” between 2 and 3 points (middle panel). The effect is much smaller among other respondents, –1 point (right panel). Democratic supporters of most parties fail to accept electoral outcomes in which a party (AfD) that is threatening democracy performs well while democratic supporters of AfD seem similarly threatened by the performance of their most disliked party.²⁰ However, the figure also shows that the most pro-democratic supporters of parties other than the AfD are also *not* more willing to accept an electoral outcome in which their most disliked party performs well, even when this party is not the AfD.

Finally, Figure 7(b) (left and middle panel) shows that AfD haters and supporters are also much affected by the performance of their most disliked party in their likelihood to protest (by about the same magnitude than in Figure 7(a)); however, citizens holding alternative partisan preferences are not (right panel). The effect of the performance of the most disliked party on their probability to protest against the electoral outcome is nil, regardless of their level of democratic support (the interaction term between the two variables is not statistically significant, see Supplemental Appendix 8). Positive and negative partisanship toward the AfD is thus a key variable to understand the negative relationship between democratic support and electoral consent when measured as the likelihood to participate in a protest contesting the electoral outcome.

Conclusion

We address in this study a simple yet fundamental question: whether citizens who express strong support for democratic cornerstones like universal suffrage and press freedom are also more willing to consent to outcomes in which their most liked (disliked) party performs poorly (well). As stated at the outset, there are good reasons to believe that democrats are more likely to consent to electoral losses, considering the centrality of losers’ consent for a democratic regime’s legitimacy and survival. We also determine whether these democrats react differently to the performance of a party whose commitment to democracy is questionable.

To this effect, we designed an original survey that was administered to a representative sample of 5000 Germans, a well-established democracy like many others, where a party whose support for democracy is at the very least unclear is increasingly popular. We exposed our respondents to hypothetical yet plausible electoral outcomes showing

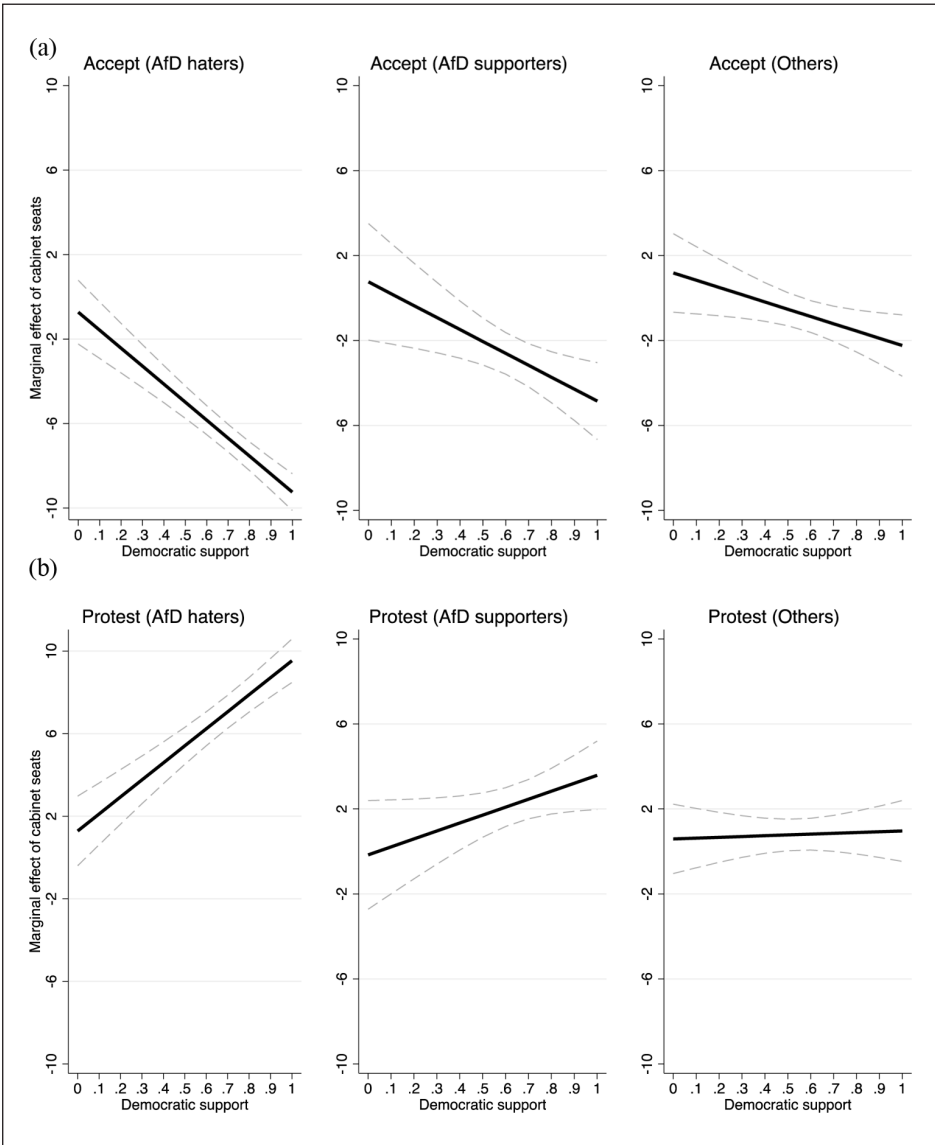


Figure 7. a: Marginal effect of cabinet seat share of most disliked party on outcome acceptance as democratic support increases, by partisan sub-group. b: Marginal effect of cabinet seat share of most disliked party on outcome protest as democratic support increases, by partisan sub-group.

Note. Entries are marginal effects of the performance of most disliked party (measured with cabinet seats) as democratic support varies from its minimum to its maximum, distinguishing respondents based on their positive and negative partisan preference. Dashed lines are the 95% confidence intervals. The regressions include an interaction term between democratic support and each performance indicator. They also include control variables at the outcome level (effective number of parties in government, effective number of parties in parliament, polarization of parties in government, frequency of governing coalition since 1990, total seat share of government) and individual level (age, gender, education, and region). Full results are available in Supplemental Appendix 8.

a randomly generated distribution of seats in parliament and government, as well as which of them got the Chancellorship. We directly asked them how acceptable or unacceptable they find this outcome, and how likely or unlikely they would participate in a protest to contest it.

Our analysis reveals that respondents are not willing to consent to outcomes where their most liked party performs poorly and/or their most disliked party performs well, even when they are strongly committed to democracy. In fact, the strongest democratic supporters express the lowest level of consent when they lose. We thus find that partisanship trumps the democratic principle of consenting to election results. The strength of partisan loyalty undermines the broader democratic practice of accepting election outcomes as legitimate, potentially contributing to increased polarization and contestation.

Importantly, we show that respondents react primarily to the performance of parties at the government level. They are only mildly affected by the legislative seat share of their most liked and disliked party. The greater weight placed on information about government composition may reflect not only that citizens consider it more important for the conduct of public policy, but also that it is aspect of the election outcome most open to contestation. Unlike parliamentary seat shares, which are a mechanical translation of the popular will, the nature of the cabinet results from coalition bargaining among parties and therefore may not carry the same legitimacy in the eyes of citizens.

Nonetheless, our results also indicate that democrats' reactions depend, to a good extent, on the presence of the far-right party, AfD, in government. The AfD is strongly disliked, especially among supporters of democracy, in good part, we assume, because of its dubious commitment to democratic principles and institutions. This suggests that the strongest democratic supporters have strong views on which political parties are beneficial or detrimental to democracy and are willing to forgo the principle of losers' consent if it means resisting against a threat to democracy. Interestingly, the same is true for the most pro-democracy supporters of AfD, who are also less likely to consent to an electoral outcome in which their most disliked party is in the cabinet, which suggests that they also consider some parties to be threatening democracy. Finally, pro-democracy believers who are neither AfD haters nor supporters are *not* more willing to accept the outcomes that they strongly dislike. We thus find that consent to concrete electoral outcomes involving concrete political parties does not align empirically with democratic support. Those who subscribe to abstract democratic principles find it hard to live with the implication, that is, one may have to accept a government in which the "worst" party plays a big role.

Our paper makes a methodological contribution by moving beyond abstract measurements of commitment to democratic principles and instead examining how these commitments manifest in practice. While the common methodological approach in the literature is to rely on abstract attitudes to gauge democratic values, we focus on responses to real-world political outcomes. This approach provides a more nuanced understanding of how democratic principles are upheld or compromised in concrete situations, revealing the gap between abstract support for democracy and practical adherence when faced with contrary partisan interests.

Our paper also offers important empirical insights into contemporary political developments across many democracies, where far-right parties increasingly pose challenges to regime stability. While differences across political systems may limit the generalizability of our results, our findings suggest a broader pattern: citizens who express strong commitment to democratic principles may nevertheless be willing to renounce the core idea of electoral consent. Paradoxically, this tendency is presumably

driven in part by a willingness to protect democracy from backsliding when governments are taken over by parties they strongly oppose and view as threatening the regime. This dynamic may help explain citizens' reaction to forthcoming elections in countries where candidates with clear autocratic tendencies compete for power, such as the United States or France.

Interestingly, our findings indicate that a similar logic also applies among supporters of far-right parties. Among these respondents, those who report strong commitment to democratic principles likewise express greater willingness to contest unfavorable electoral outcomes. This paradoxical pattern echoes recent events in Poland, where far-right parties and candidates have often justified anti-democratic reforms as efforts to protect or restore a conception of "true" democracy allegedly threatened by progressive ideas (Bor and Mazepus, 2026). Overall, our study highlights how democracy itself may become a polarized object of political conflict, increasing the risk of spirals of electoral contestation.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/08/german-court-rules-far-right-afd-party-a-suspected-threat-to-democracy>.
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/21/germany-afd-party-deportation-masterplan-protests>.
3. We do not make any causal claim between democratic support and electoral consent. Individual-level factors, such as political interest, political engagement, or greater propensities to contest establishment (Kriesi et al., 2012), may confound this relationship. Nonetheless, we believe it is important to examine the correlation between the two variables, given their strong association in both theoretical and empirical work.
4. The pre-analysis plan is available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/J26WP> (see sub-project 3). Results regarding the two other sub-projects are part of another paper.

5. Similarly, the authoritarian turn taken by Orbán in Hungary crystallized opposition to him and his party, Fidesz, among supporters of other parties (Gessler and Wunsch, 2025).
6. This project received ethical clearance from the IRB of the University of Montreal and the University of Vienna.
7. Note that the electoral outcomes did not disclose information about vote shares, given that the connection between seats and power in the decision-making process is more direct. Furthermore, it is easier to provide the information in terms of seats than votes in a country like Germany where voters have two votes. Finally, given the mixed-member proportional system used in the country, seat shares and vote shares are (almost) identical after removing the parties that do not pass the 5% representation threshold.
8. We opted for a textual description of the electoral outcome rather than a visual one. Although visual representations are in general more readable, but it would create an issue of digital storage due to the very large number of possible electoral outcomes (see below), as well as an issue of how to convey three pieces of information, parliamentary seats, cabinet seats and Chancellorship, in a single graph.
9. We deliberately refrain from describing this design as an experiment, as it does not include a control group. It is indeed difficult to conceive a survey question that would capture electoral consent in the absence of an electoral outcome. In addition, we view the randomization not as a tool for causal identification, but as a means of expanding the range of electoral outcomes generated in our data. Survey designs of this kind are common in political science; however, recent methodological contributions caution against labeling them as experiments, in order to avoid conceptual ambiguity and misinterpretation (Bol, 2026; Torreblanca et al., 2025).
10. Note that excluding small parties that do not reach the 5% vote threshold from seat distribution does not constitute a problem given that we impose the total seat shares to equal 100%.
11. We imposed these constraints in the random generation of vignettes, despite compromising full randomization, to ensure plausibility while covering a diversity of different electoral outcomes.
12. The full wording of these two questions in English and German can be found in Supplemental Appendix 2.
13. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-says-accept-2024-results-fair-legal-airing-false-2020-fraud-clai-rcna159372>.
14. Respondents also had the possibility to respond “don’t know” to the party liking questions. There are thus some missing values on these variables, but they only represent 3% of the total sample. These are the respondents who rate less than two parties and refused to break up the ties.
15. In the pre-analysis plan, we only consider the position of the AfD in the outcome in terms of cabinet performance. However, for the sake of consistency with the rest of the analysis, we also test the other indicator performances, i.e. parliamentary seat shares and Chancellorship.
16. Respectively, “if a federal election was taking place in Germany this week, which party would you be most likely to vote for?” and “Which party would you NEVER vote?”
17. In our sample, 50% of respondents show such mild preferences for their most liked party. Note that, in the pre-analysis plan, we only consider removing respondents with mild preferences for the most disliked party. However more than 96% of respondents have such negative mild preferences. Hence, we decided to drop this extra test.
18. Note that the multinomial regressions relaxing the linear assumption show that, although the effect of cabinet seat share of most (dis)liked party is symmetric, the one of Chancellorship is not. When the Chancellor is from the most liked party of the respondent, they are more likely to give a high acceptance value, but not less likely to give a low acceptance value (reference category: neutral acceptance value). By contrast, when the Chancellor is from their most disliked party, they are less likely to give a low acceptance value but equally likely to give a neutral or high value. The same applies to the protest dependent variable.
19. Note that prop-democracy AfD supporters are more likely to consent to electoral outcomes in which they favorite party performs well, unlike other supporters (see Supplemental Appendix 8).
20. Note that 70% of AfD supporters’ most disliked party is the Greens.

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