

Ideological Extremism, Perceived Party Ideological Polarisation, and Principled Support for Liberal Democracy

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Abstract:

Does ideological polarisation undermine or strengthen people's commitment to liberal democratic rules and principles? In this study, we suggest that different manifestations of ideological polarisation have different implications in this respect. Using data from 19 surveys conducted in a group of democratic countries with nationally representative samples forming part of the Comparative National and Elections Project (CNEP), we look at how people's level of ideological extremism (demand-side polarisation) and their perceptions of partisan ideological polarisation (supply-side polarisation) are related with their principled support for liberal democracy. We demonstrate that citizens who hold more extreme ideological positions are indeed less supportive of democracy and that such a negative relationship is strengthened as citizens' extremism increases. However, we also show that citizens who perceive the partisan supply as neither too polarised nor too depolarised in ideological terms display stronger democratic support. In other words, the perception that parties are either too distant from or too close to each other ideologically seems to undermine citizens' faith in the principles of liberal democracy.

Introduction

Across today's democracies, citizens' allegiance to the principles and practices of liberal democracy seems less robust than once thought. Although most cross-national surveys show a generalized preference on the part of citizens for democracy, a considerable segment of those who express such preference seem simultaneously comfortable with endorsing non-democratic alternatives and with a conception of "democracy" that fails to emphasize free and fair elections, equal political rights, or checks and balances (Inglehart 2003; Schedler & Sarsfield 2007; Carlin & Singer 2011; Welzel 2011). It has even been argued that the established democracies in North America and Western Europe have experienced a "deconsolidation" from this point of view, particularly among the younger generations (Foa & Mounk 2016 and 2017). Although such diagnostic has been since then questioned and nuanced (Alexander & Wetzel 2017; Voeten 2017; Claassen 2020a; Wuttke et al.2020), the fact remains that the notion of a nearly universal adherence to the liberal democratic principles is difficult to sustain today.

Different sorts of explanations have been advanced as to why some citizens are less likely to display support for liberal democratic principles than others, including economic inequality (Kriekhaus et al. 2014, Ceka & Magalhães 2020), the lack of experience with democratic governance (Booth & Seligson 2009), or the low prevalence of "emancipative values" stressing freedom of choice and individual autonomy (Welzel 2013). More recently, however, the potentially detrimental consequences of ideological polarisation have begun to receive greater attention. Back in the 1970s, Sartori noted that a large ideological distance between the 'lateral poles' of a party system was 'tantamount to saying that cleavages are likely to be very deep, that consensus is surely low, and that the legitimacy of the political system is widely questioned' (Sartori 1976: 135). Sartori's prescient concern with the implications of ideological polarisation for democratic legitimacy has been revived in recent years. It has been argued that polarisation constitutes in general and in different ways a potential danger for

democratic stability and, particularly, for citizens' principled commitment to liberal democracy and its institutions, principles, and practices (McCoy et al. 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018; Carothers & Donahue 2019; Svobik 2019; Nalepa et al. 2018).

In this study, we examine two different individual-level mechanisms that help illuminating the relationship between ideological polarisation and support for liberal democratic principles. The first is concerned with ideological polarisation among voters, manifested in the extent to which they tend to place themselves in extreme ideological positions. More specifically, we examine whether the extent to which individuals position themselves farther from the mean ideological position in their society (the country average) — their *ideological extremism* — is related with a lower level of commitment to liberal democracy and its basic principles. The second individual-level mechanism is concerned with party system polarisation, but particularly the extent to which voters *perceive* their party system to be ideologically polarised. More specifically, we examine whether the ideological distance between candidates or parties, as perceived by voters themselves, is related with their propensity to withdraw support from democratic rules and practices. In recent important studies using experimental or quasi-experimental data (Svobik & Graham 2020; Svobik 2019 and 2020), both citizens' ideological extremism and candidate polarisation have been shown to increase the propensity of voters to tolerate candidates who engage in undemocratic practices. Do we observe a similar propensity to discard liberal democratic rules and principles using observational data from a broad multi-national variety of contexts?

For data, we resort to a subset of the post-election surveys conducted under the *Comparative National Elections Project* (CNEP).¹ In a subset of 19 surveys conducted in democratic countries contained in such comparative dataset, we find a unique combination of

¹ The CNEP is a comparative survey project that includes data on 54 election/countries between 1992 (US) and 2018 from America, Asia and Africa. For more on CNEP, see u.osu.edu/cnep.

features crucial for our purposes. First, those surveys obtained from respondents their self-placement along an ideological left-right/liberal-conservative scale, allowing the measurement of their level of ideological extremism. Second, more unusually, those same surveys also elicited from respondents their assessments of where the major political parties in their respective political system are positioned along a similar left-right or the liberal-conservative scale (for the US). This permits the construction of a variable capturing voters' perception of the extent to which their party system is ideologically polarized. Third, unlike any other post-election survey, these same CNEP studies also capture respondents' attitudes towards democracy in ways that go beyond either the frequently used "satisfaction with democracy" or voters' "overt" preference for democracy as a regime, both long shown to be inadequate to capture diffuse regime support (Linde & Ekman 2003; Ariely & Davidov 2011). Instead, these surveys include questions related to the explicit rejection of autocratic solutions and the endorsement of liberal rights and freedoms, allowing us to employ a variable capturing citizens' *principled support for liberal democracy*.

In the following section, we address the implications that ideological extremism and perceived party system ideological polarisation should have for individuals' support for liberal democratic principles. We discuss the existing literature and its findings and present our own expectations. Section 3 presents our data and estimation strategies. Section 4 is centred in employing a non-parametric strategy to examine the functional form of those relationships, later confirmed by parametric estimates. Finally, section 5 summarizes and discusses our findings, their limitations, and implications.

Theory, existing findings, and main expectations

Ideological extremism and democratic support

The notion that ideological extremism is antithetical to liberal democracy has a long historical pedigree. In modern discourse, the very concept of “extremism” established itself, first, in the context of the 1917 Russian Revolution, to describe the “extreme left” threat to the democratic establishment, and it was expanded later to describe the threat coming from the “extreme right,” following the rise of Fascism and Nazism (Backes 2007: 244). As Arzheimer (2011) notes, this is the fundamental basis of the notion behind the relationship between ideological extremism or radicalism — understood in spatial terms, along a left-right axis — and anti-democratic positions.

Many empirical studies show that the extent to which voters place themselves in extreme ideological, issue, and policy positions is correlated with attitudes that are uncongenial to the acceptance of democratic rules and practices, such as alternation, checks and balances, or respect for minority rights. For example, ideological extremists seem less likely than moderates to exhibit ‘loser’s consent,’ that is, to accept electoral defeat as a legitimate outcome (Anderson et al. 2005), and are instead more prone to adhere to conspiratorial theories about electoral integrity (Miller et al. 2016; Krouwel et al. 2017; Norris et al. 2020). Ideological extremists also tend to reject the *status quo* of representative democracy in favour of other forms of governance (Wojcieszak 2014), to be more politically distrustful (Kutiyskii et al. 2020), to hold intolerant views about ethnic, religious or ideological minorities (Midlarsky 2011), to be more inflexible about the correctness of their beliefs and the incorrectness of those of others (Toner et al. 2013), and to feel greater animosity towards parties other than their own (Berglund et al. 2005; Rico 2010; Schmitt & Holmberg 1995).

These findings are compounded by more direct and compelling evidence showing that ideological or policy extremists are unlikely to be the reliable supporters of liberal democratic

institutions and practices. Graham and Svulik (2020) develop a theoretical framework where voters with preferences over both positional issues and democratic principles choose candidates that vary both on their policy platforms and on their compliance with democratic rules and practices. In a series of survey-based candidate choice experiments conducted in the United States, Venezuela, and Turkey (Svulik 2019 and 2020; Graham & Svulik 2020), they show that voters who hold more extreme policy positions are more willing to tolerate undemocratic behaviours displayed by candidates, in exchange for getting policies closer to their ideal points. In Venezuela, only ideologically moderate voters were willing to defect from candidates who advanced an undemocratic platform — in this case, a heavily partisan composition of the Supreme Court and the electoral commission. In turn, those with more extreme positions ended up trading-off policy with democracy, if the former is according to their preferences (Svulik 2020). In the United States, citizens with more extreme positions on either side of different issues were less likely (in comparison with moderates) to defect from candidates who proposed to engage in undemocratic practices, such as packing courts and electoral commissions, suppressing votes, ignoring court rulings, and violating media freedoms and the right of assembly (Graham & Svulik 2020). This suggests that voters with more extreme positions are less likely to be truly committed with a defence of liberal democracy and its principles.

It is important to note, however, that many studies using observational data have failed to support this hypothesis. Although Foa and Munck (2016) do allude to the rise of political radicalism among the young as a potential explanation of their purported distancing from democracy, Karp and Milazzo (2015), using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) in 22 countries, find no relation between ideological extremism (captured as the absolute distance from the median voter in the country) and either satisfaction with democracy or — more importantly — support for democracy, captured there as the propensity

to agree with the sentence (“Democracy may have problems but it’s better than any other form of government”).

Other studies suggest that it is not “extremism” in general, but rather extremely conservative or right-wing views that are associated with authoritarian preferences: Sprong et al. (2019), examining a large sample of college undergraduates across 28 countries, find that preferences for a “strong leader” increase with right-wing political orientations, lending credence to an asymmetry hypothesis (Nilsson & Jost 2020). Finally, yet other studies suggest that the relationship between ideology and anti-democratic attitudes is contextually contingent. De Leeuw et al. (2021) find that, in countries with a mostly uninterrupted experience with democracy throughout the 20th century, ideological extremists of both sides are indeed less likely to support democracy. However, in post-communist countries, such lower support is likely to be found among left-wing voters, while the same occurs among right-wing voters in countries with a history of fascist or military regimes. In conclusion, the relationship between the ideological extremism of citizens and their democratic attitudes seems deserving of deeper examination. Based on the preceding discussion our first hypothesis follows:

H1. The relationship between the ideological extremism of citizens and their principled support for liberal democracy should be negative.

Perceived party ideological polarisation and democratic support

Voters’ ideological extremism and the extent to which they perceive their party system to be ideologically polarized are not unrelated phenomena. People who hold more extreme ideological positions also tend to perceive parties as holding more extreme positions themselves (Ward & Tavits 2019) and to see their party system as more ideologically polarised (Lupu 2015). However, it should also be obvious that the two constructs are not one and the

same. While one is related to, so to speak, to the demand-side of politics, the other is related to how voters view the available political and partisan supply.

One of the classic treatments of the consequences of voters' perceptions of the ideological and policy positions of parties is provided by Bartolini (1999, 2000). Bartolini defines 'electoral decidability'— akin to Downs's (1957) 'party differential' — as 'the level of policy or issue position differentiation among parties, and the visibility and clarity of these differences for the voter' (Bartolini 2000: 33; see also Bartolini 1992 and 1999). For Bartolini, excessive decidability poses a problem for well-functioning democracies. In democracies, the benefits of competition between parties and candidates over policies require that such competition is restrained within a 'capsule' of 'norms, social practices and legal provisions which define the conditions of competition' (Bartolini 2000: 38). Agreement around this capsule indicates that adherence to certain norms should not be part of the competition. However, the maximisation of electoral decidability risks putting these norms into play.

Svolik and Graham (2020) show precisely what happens when such norms become part of the choice set of voters under conditions of high candidate polarisation: "greater candidate polarisation results in a greater share of voters who are willing to tolerate undemocratic behavior [...] independently of voter polarisation" (Graham & Svolik 2020: 401). In their study, indeed, the more candidates are ideologically distant from each other, the more likely it is that a voter who must choose between very ideologically distant options ends up discounting the democratic credentials of such options.

However, there is another side to this problem. Bartolini also suggested that the *minimisation* of electoral decidability could become problematic as well for system support. At least to some extent, parties must offer some differences for voters: '[w]hatever the party offers, it must be (1) different from what other parties offer and (2) clearly perceived by voters' (Bartolini 1992: 95; see also Bartolini 2000: 33). When there is collusion between parties, when

previously divisive issues are converted into performance/valence issues, and when parties present blurred positions or policies, voters may end up finding the positions of parties to be almost indistinguishable. The mass level consequences of bringing decidability to such a minimum, as hypothesised by Bartolini, were ‘political indifference and/or alienation’ as well as ‘political dissatisfaction, voter defection, and even mass disenfranchisement’ (Bartolini 1992: 105).

Several studies lend empirical support to this argument. We know that low levels of (perceived) polarisation between parties or candidates are related with lower levels of turnout, as a result of an ‘electoral market failure’ (Lago & Martinez 2011: 7) leading to ‘indifference-based abstention’ (Plane & Gershtenson 2004; Hobolt & Hoerner 2020; Wessels & Schmitt 2008; Dalton 2008; Hetherington 2009; Westfall et al. 2015; Ender & Armaly 2019). However, and more importantly for our purposes, the minimisation of electoral decidability also seems to have attitudinal consequences. Across a large number of political systems, the perception that the partisan supply is ideologically undifferentiated seems to decrease the intensity with which one believes that “who people vote for” or “who is in power” makes any difference, or that there is “a party that represents one’s views” (Kittilson & Anderson 2011; Blais et al. 2014; Pardos-Prado & Riera 2016; Wagner 2020; Hobolt et al. 2020).

Schmitt and Freire (2012) had already suggested that the relationship between ideological polarisation and the quality of democracy might be *curvilinear* rather than linear. On the one hand, acute ideological polarisation might be harmful by threatening the procedural dimension of democracy, including ‘requirements such as the rule of law, freedom of speech, and free and fair elections’ (Schmitt & Freire 2012: 67). On the other hand, acute ideological depolarisation might be harmful for the *substantive* quality of representative democracy, as it causes a ‘lack of issue congruence between voters and the parties they vote for, because parties under those conditions lack a distinct issue agenda and policy profile’ (Schmitt & Freire 2012: 68).

All this suggests the possibility that voters who perceive their party system to be either *too much* and *too little* polarized may both be more prone to withdraw their support from the regime and its basic traits. In a recent study using Module 3 of CSES, Ridge (2021) finds precisely that those who perceive either very little or very major differences between parties are less likely to express satisfaction with the way democracy works in their country. We suggest this should also be the case for the support to liberal democratic principles. In other words, the relationship between perceived party ideological polarisation and principled support for democracy should be an inverted-U shape: support for liberal democratic principles should be higher when individuals perceived party ideological polarisation in the party system to be neither extremely low nor extremely high:

H2. The relationship between the perceived party ideological polarisation and principled support for liberal democracy should be curvilinear.

Data and Estimation Strategy

Data

The combination of measures of ideological self-placement, of assessments of where parties are placed along the same scale, and of valid measures of support to liberal democratic principles that allows us to simultaneously test our two hypotheses is extremely unusual in cross-national surveys. However, the Comparative National Elections Project does include 19 nationally representative surveys with precisely that unique combination of features.²

The first of those features is the ability to use responses to questions that aim at capturing something more than mere “lip service” to democracy. Ariely and Davidov (2011)

² The list of this countries/years is the following Argentina 2017, Chile 2017, Colombia 2014 and 2018, France 2017, Germany 2017, Great Britain 2017, Greece 2015, Indonesia 2019, Mexico 2006, 2012 and 2018, S. Africa 2004 and 2014, Spain 2015, Taiwan 2016, US 2016 and 2020.

show that, for the purpose of measuring support for democracy, items that elicit such support overtly and superficially tend to cause problems of internal consistency, reliability, and cross-cultural equivalence of measures. In the same line, Carlin and Singer (2011) proposed the use of new measures to capture the support to the basic rights, liberties, and practices associated with polyarchy identifying five profiles of support for—public contestation, inclusive participation, limits on executive authority, and institutional checks and balances. Therefore, we take a similar route. Our measure of democratic support is based on five items. Three of them gauge the extent to which respondents disagree with particular (anti-democratic) ways of “governing the country”: “Only one political party should be allowed to stand for election and hold office”; “Elections and the National Assembly should be abolished so that we can have a strong leader running this country”; and “The army should govern the country.” The other two items capture the extent to which respondents consider “free and fair elections” and “freedom to criticize the government” as essential features “for a society to be called democratic”.

We estimate an exploratory factor analysis of principal components in each country/year (see results in Table 1A in the Appendix). The results confirm the presence of a unique factor with an eigenvalue superior to 1.00 (except for Mexico 2018 with 0.998). The Cronbach’s alpha for these five items is moving in all country/years between 0.6 and 0.81, except for Indonesia 2019 due low loading of one of the items with one of the items. Thus, we use the resulting factor score by country/year as our main dependent variable, *principled support for liberal democracy*.

Second, we need a measure of individuals’ *ideological extremism* (IE), one of our two main independent variables of interest. Except for some United States-based studies — where voters’ issue preferences are often used (Abramowitz 2010; Abramowitz & Saunders 2008; Iyengar et al. 2012: 422-5; Lelkes 2016: 394-8)³ — most comparative studies on this topic look

³ For a critical view on this operationalisation see Fiorina and Levendusky (2006: 96-97).

at voters' positions on the dominant ideological dimension of party competition: the left–right scale. In Europe, voters' position on the left/right dimension is one of the strongest predictors of voting choices (Rosema & de Vries 2011; Schmitt & Thomassen 2009; van der Brug et al. 2009), and constitutes the main dimension of political conflict and policy representation (Costello et al. 2012). Additionally, although the specific meaning of left and right might change from country to country in Latin America (see Kitschelt et al. 2010), increasing evidence suggests its widespread use as an heuristic device across Latin American societies (Zechmeister & Corral 2013), even showing how elite polarisation along the left-right scale strengthens the connection between voters' ideological placement and their vote choices (Singer 2016). Additionally, this framework has been employed to explain the dynamics of the party system polarisation and dispersion since the classic work published by Sartori (1976) and Sani and Sartori (1983), as well as its consequences for democratic breakdowns (Linz & Stepan 1979). Only in the case of US the scale used is the conservative/liberal scale.

Extremism, from this point of view, is typically obtained by calculating the absolute or square distance between each respondent's left–right self-placement and some central position, either the mid-point of the scale or the average or median of all voters (Weldon & Dalton 2014; Ward & Tavits 2019; Bischof & Wagner 2019; Wagner 2020). Directional models suggest that the extremism of voters' preferences can be captured by calculating their distance from the centre of the ideological scale (Rabinowitz & Macdonald 1989). We follow the latter by computing IE as the absolute difference between the respondents' left-right/liberal-conservative self-placement and the average placement of respondents from the same country/year. In other words, IE is simply:

$$\mathbf{IE}_i = \sqrt{(Ideol_i - \overline{Ideol})^2} \quad [1]$$

where $Ideol_i$ denotes the left–right/liberal–conservative position of each individual respondent i , and \overline{Ideol} denotes the country–year average of the ideological self-placement of voters. This distance is squared to produce positive values and then the square root taken to readapt the metric to the original scale.

Finally, we need a measure of individuals’ perception of the ideological polarisation in their country’s party system. Based on the classic treatment by Hazan (1995 and 1997), voter surveys can be used to assess the extent to which citizens *perceive* the party system as ideologically polarised (Lelkes 2016: 399) or dispersed (Alvarez & Nagler 2004: 50; Ezrow 2007: 186). With this measure, which has commonly been used in the most recent comparative literature (Curini & Hito 2012; Dalton 2008; Lachat 2008; Lupu 2015; Wagner 2020), we can determine how each voter places the partisan supply along the left–right/liberal–conservative continuum. With that information we can calculate how far voters perceive parties to be from each other and from some central position (overall citizens’ average or some other party supply measurement). Typically, these measures also consider each party’s contribution to overall polarisation or dispersion by weighting their share of the popular vote (the utility or expected benefit of its support). We thus measure *Weighted Perceived Ideological Polarisation* (WPIP), following the work of Wagner (2020) using the following formula:

$$WPIP_i = \sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^p v_p * (IdPosition_{ip} - \overline{IdPosition}_i)^2} \quad [2.1]$$

where p is the political party, i is the individual respondent, $IdPosition_{ip}$ is the left-right position of party p assigned by respondent i , $\overline{IdPosition}_i$ is the respondent’s average

ideological position of political parties, and v_p is the size of each party, measured as the normalized proportion of votes that each selected party received. The average ideological position of political parties is also weighted by their respective party electoral size:

$$\overline{IdPosition}_i = \sum_{p=1}^p (v_p * IdPosition_{ip}) \quad [2.2]$$

This index has been calculated for all respondents who attribute an ideological position to at least two parties.

Our main criterion of inclusion of countries in the CNEP dataset, besides the availability of these variables, is whether the country was a democracy at the time the survey was conducted. First, survey respondents in non-democracies are potentially constrained in expressing sincere responses about matters such as ‘freedom to criticize the government’ or ‘one party rule,’ and are, in some cases, subject to very real ‘pressures to limit their responses to opinions supportive of the regime they live under (Scotto & Singer 2004: 479). Second, extremism and perceived polarisation are likely to have different implications under democracies and non-democracies. For example, the degree of ideological differentiation of the partisan supply should be of little consequence for citizens if there is little uncertainty in the electoral outcome. To use Bartolini’s (2000) language again, without ‘vulnerability’ — ‘the possibility for an incumbent government to be ousted or replaced or otherwise modified in its composition as a result of chances in voters’ choices’ (2000: 52) — the potential consequences of the polarization of whatever partisan supply may exist are likely to be suppressed by the overarching constraint induced by inconsequential elections. Therefore, in our analysis, we focus exclusively on surveys conducted in democratic regimes, relying on the V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al. 2021) to identify them per country and (survey) year. More concretely, we use

the variable *v2x_regime*, which allows us to exclude regimes identified as “electoral autocracies” or “closed autocracies”.

The resulting list of the democratic country/years in CNEP where these variables can be obtained includes a variety of countries from different regions and institutional settings: it includes surveys conducted in older Western democracies, such as France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States; third-wave democracies in Southern Europe, such as Greece and Spain; Latin American democracies such as Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico; two Asian democracies, Indonesia and Taiwan; and an African democracy, South Africa.

Estimation

To test our hypotheses, we start by estimating a Generalized Additive Model (GAM) (Wood 2006), allowing for a more data-driven and flexible approach to the study of the functional form of the relationship between extremism (IE) or perceived polarization (WPIP) with principled support for democracy. More concretely, GAMs allow the estimation of “smooth” rather than parametric terms for our variables of interest, by estimating the coefficients for a series of basic functions that (may) add up to a more complex relationship than a mere linear one. This is of particular importance for the test of H2 — the curvilinear relationship between WPIP and democratic support — but can also examine whether the proposed negative relationship between extremism and democratic support we predicted in H1 is linear or not. After a first examination of the functional form of the relationship between these variables using GAMs, we also estimate models using OLS to confirm our findings.

In this study, we are mainly interested in relationships that occur at the individual level, that is, between extremism and perceived party ideological polarisation on the one hand and principled support for democracy on the other. Therefore, in both our GAM and OLS estimations, we adopt a fixed-effects approach that enables us to examine the relationship

between ‘Level 1’ (individual level) variables while variability associated with the cluster level (country/year) is accounted for, thereby reducing the problem of omitted variable bias at the cluster level (Huang 2016). In particular, we include double-fixed effects—year/country dummies to control for the effect of exogenous changes in each country over time —and (in OLS) country–year cluster-corrected standard errors.

Finally, the models also contain controls for individual-level variables available in all surveys. Left-right self-placement adjusts for the possibility that, independently of the effect of how far citizens are from the ideological centre of the electorate, voters located either more to the left or to the right may be more or less supportive of democracy and its principles. Party identification and economic evaluations take into account the possibility that both extremism and democratic support are being driven either by negative feelings towards existing parties or by negative evaluations of government outputs.⁴ Unfortunately, in the surveys, we lack measures of citizens’ “emancipative values”, which are important correlates of liberal understandings of democracy (Welzel 2011). However, we are able to control for education, a correlate of those variables, and also a marker of socioeconomic status. Additionally, we include other variables that might condition the relationship between polarisation and support to such principles such as political interest (most interested respondents tend to be more polarized), and age (see for instance, Boxell, et al. 2017). Finally, we also include gender.

Results

Table 1 presents our GAM results, which introduce smooth terms for the IE and WPIP covariates, estimating the shape of their relationship with support for liberal democratic principles without making any assumptions about functional forms.

⁴ In the robustness section, we discuss results when the economic evaluations variable is replaced by — less broadly available in our surveys — evaluations of governance performance. All main results stand.

The second section of the table shows the conventional parametric terms. They show that support for liberal democratic principles increases with party identification, political interest, and age, is lower among women and the more individuals place themselves to the right (independently of how extreme their ideological positions are), and that people who evaluate the economic situation as “very good” are particularly less likely to express support for liberal democratic principles.

Table 1: Extremism, perceived polarisation and principled support for liberal democracy in 19 elections (Generalized additive models with country-year fixed effects).

		All 19 country/years
<hr/>		
Effective degrees of freedom		
s (Ideological extremism-IE)		3.69***
s (Weighted perceived ideological polarisation-WPIP)		6.30***
<hr/>		
Parametric coefficients		
Left-right self-placement		-0.05 (.002)***
Party identification		0.04 (.01)**
Economic situation:		
	Very Bad	reference
	Bad	-0.01 (.02)
	Average	-0.06 (.02)***
	Good	0.01 (.02)
	Very Good	-0.15 (.04)***
Political Interest:		
	None	reference
	Not much	0.08 (0.02)***
	Somewhat	0.21 (0.02)***
	Very	0.37 (0.02)***
Education		
	Primary or less	reference
	Some secondary	0.17 (0.02)***
	Complete secondary	0.30 (0.02)***
	Some university or more	0.49 (0.02)***
Female		-0.06 (0.01)***
Age		0.008 (0.0004)***
Intercept		-0.18 (0.05)
Adjusted R ²		0.16
Country-years		19
Respondents		22,414

Country-year dummies not displayed

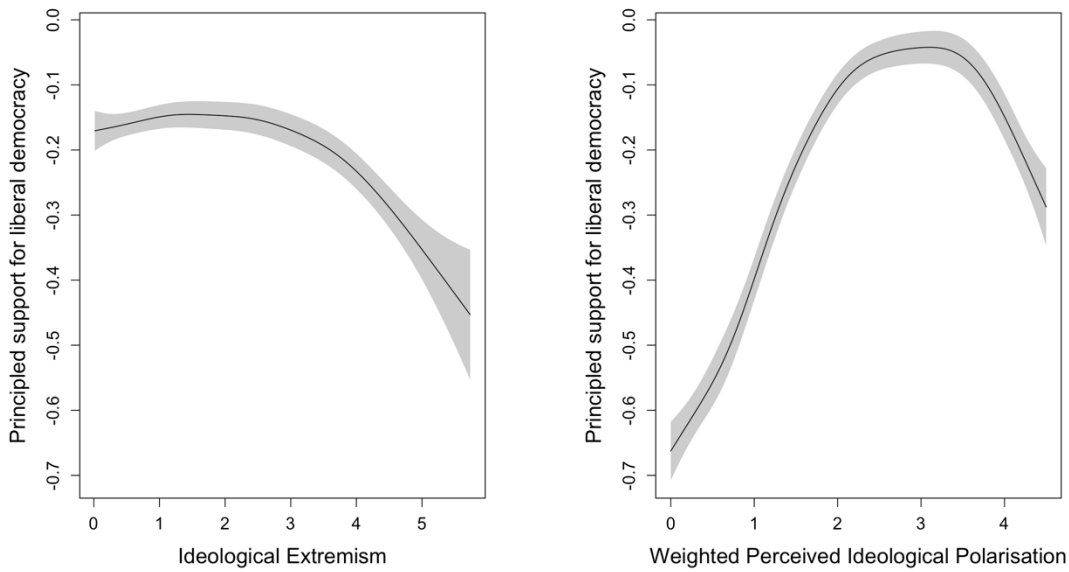
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

However, for our purposes, the most consequential results are in the first section of the table, which shows the effective degrees of freedom for each smoothed term, representing the complexity of the smooth. An edf of 1 would represent a straight line. The values for IE and WPIP, however, are, respectively, 3.69 and 6.30. The p-values, both at $p < .001$, allow us to reject

the null hypothesis that the lines representing the relationship between both variables and support for liberal democratic principles are straight lines.

But what is the form of these relationships that results from the GAM analysis? This can be easily visualized in Figure 1. As we can observe on the right panel of the figure, there is an inverse curvilinear relationship between perceived party polarization and support to liberal democratic principles. In other words, support is higher neither at the lowest nor at the highest levels of perceived polarization, confirming H2. However, on the left panel of the figure, we can also see that, although the relationship between ideological extremism and support for liberal democracies principles is broadly negative, it is not linear. Instead, it seems closer to an *exponential* relationship, through which adherence to liberal democratic principles remains mostly stable up to intermediate levels of ideological distance from the societal mean, dropping precipitously as that distance increases after those intermediate levels. In other words, the strength of the negative relationship between extremism and support for liberal democratic principles increases as the level of extremism itself increases.

Figure 1: Non-linear relationships between extremism, perceived partisan polarization and principled support for liberal democracy based on results from Model 1.



To confirm these findings, we shift to OLS and estimate three models. The first one assumes linearity in the relationship between IE and WPIP and support for liberal democracy. The second model adds a quadratic transformation of WPIP as formulated in H2 and corroborated by the preceding GAM estimation. Finally, the third model adds an exponential term for IE, represented by the function $f(x) = -(e^{bx})$, with x being the IE scale.

Table 2: Ideological extremism, perceived partisan polarisation and principled support for liberal democracy (OLS with country–year fixed effects)

	Model 1 Linear specifications	Model 2 Adding a quadratic term for partisan polarisation	Model 3 Final Model Exponential term for individual extremism and quadratic term for partisan polarisation
Ideological extremism-IE	-0.030* (0.011)	-0.025* (0.010)	0.009 (0.018)
Perceived party system ideological polarisation-WPIP	0.115*** (0.021)	0.475*** (0.079)	0.464*** (0.078)
Exponential IE	Not included	Not included	-0.002** (0.000)
WPIP²	Not included	-0.082*** (0.015)	-0.080*** (0.015)
Left–right self-placement	-0.053*** (0.009)	-0.053*** (0.008)	-0.054*** (0.008)
Party identification	0.058 (0.030)	0.046 (0.029)	0.042 (0.030)
Economic situation:			
Very Bad	Reference	Reference	Reference
Bad	0.012 (0.041)	-0.001 (0.037)	-0.005 (0.037)
Average	-0.046 (0.048)	-0.055 (0.045)	-0.058 (0.044)
Good	0.030 (0.081)	0.013 (0.076)	0.010 (0.075)
Very Good	-0.143 (0.202)	-0.151 (0.194)	-0.154 (0.194)
Political interest:			
None	Reference	Reference	Reference
Not Much	0.100* (0.037)	0.074* (0.030)	0.072* (0.030)
Somewhat	0.254*** (0.063)	0.214*** (0.051)	0.210*** (0.051)
Very	0.418*** (0.078)	0.368*** (0.063)	0.363*** (0.063)
Education			
Primary or less	Reference	Reference	Reference
Some secondary	0.172*** (0.025)	0.166*** (0.026)	0.165*** (0.026)
Complete secondary	0.313*** (0.023)	0.302*** (0.022)	0.301*** (0.022)
Some university or more	0.517*** (0.034)	0.490*** (0.036)	0.487*** (0.036)
Female	-0.069** (0.018)	-0.058** (0.016)	-0.059** (0.016)
Age	0.008*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)
Intercept	-0.491*** (0.087)	-0.721*** (0.105)	-1.044*** (0.122)
Adjusted R ²	0.144	0.161	0.163
AIC	53716.85	53260.16	53223.62
BIC	53845.13	53396.46	53367.93
Country-years	19	19	19
Respondents	22414	22414	22414

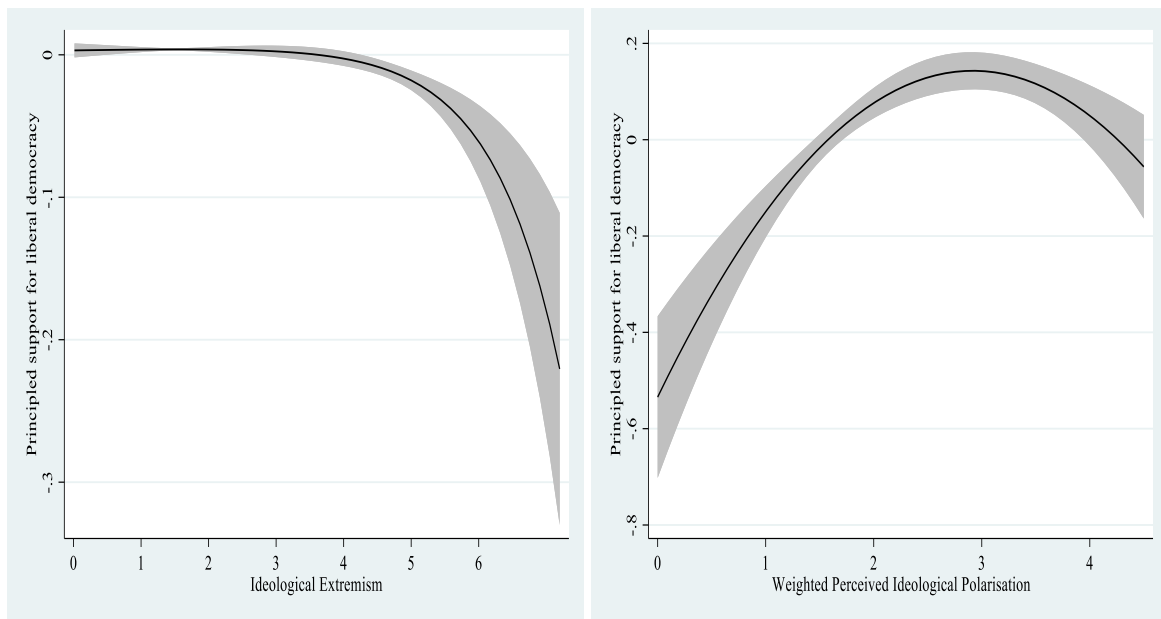
Note: Standard errors clustered corrected by country–year in parentheses; Country-year dummies not displayed.

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

The results are presented in Table 2. As can be seen from the table, the simple linear specifications of the main variables—*IE* and *WPIP*—yield statistically significant coefficients (first column): whereas the former seems to be negatively related with principled democratic support, the latter seems positively related. However, when we add the quadratic term of perceived party ideological polarisation as we proposed in H2 (Model 2, second column), this term is negative and significant, and the fit of the model (lower Akaike Information Criterion and higher adjusted R^2) improves, thus exhibiting a better adjustment to the data. In the third column, Model 3, the exponential term for individual extremism is negative and significant, and its addition produces a new improvement in the fit of the model, confirming that this relationship seems to be better captured by an exponential form.

Figure 2 presents the predicted values of the dependent variable according to Model 3 (Table 2). As can be seen on the left panel of Figure 2, there is an abrupt non-linear decline in support for liberal democracy as individuals become more ideologically extreme. On the right panel, the relationship between perceived ideological polarisation in the party system and principled support for liberal democracy exhibits an ‘inverted-U’ shape, indicating that the latter is maximised when individuals perceive polarisation as neither very low nor very high.

Figure 2: Predicted values of support for liberal democratic principles with the quadratic and exponential transformation, based on Model 3, Table 2 (OLS full model)



Note: Confidence interval, 95%

In sum, the evidence leads us to reject the null hypothesis regarding the effects of IE and WPIP and to support H1 and H2. However, the negative relationship between extremism and liberal democratic support is not best described as linear, but rather as exponential: the decline in support for liberal democratic principles seems to be larger as ideological extremism increases. To put it differently, maybe the mere distance between the individual's position and the ideological societal mean does not necessarily capture the kind of "extremism" that is consequential for democratic values: instead, the distance that is associated with a decline in support for democracy is a "large" distance, the one that places individuals considerably far from the mean position of society, and only that distance undermines support for liberal democratic principles. This is both a conceptual and measurement issue about "ideological extremism" that might deserve more detailed attention in future research.

Robustness

To assess the robustness of our results, we conducted several additional analyses. First, we replace economic evaluations as a control variable for evaluations of government performance, a variable that might capture better the potential contamination of diffuse support for democracy by specific support. Unfortunately, the latter variable is available in a smaller number of surveys. However, in the appendix, we show results of additional GAM and OLS estimations where such a replacement is made. Using evaluations of government performance reduces the number of individual-level cases from about 22,000 to 19,000 observations and from 19 to 15 country/years. Despite of this, results are clearly confirmed as we can see in the first column in Table 3A in the appendix containing our OLS estimation (for the GAM estimation see Table 4A also in the appendix). The visualization of predicted values coming from this models also confirm the functional form of the relationship we observed with the models including only economic evaluation (see Figures 1A for the OLS models and 3A for the GAM ones in the appendix).

Second, as Iverssen and Soskice (2015) have argued, it is possible that voters' positions very close to the centre are more a reflection of an incapacity to express their ideological positions — caused by low levels of sophistication — than an expression of ideological moderation. Similarly, the inability to perceive any ideological difference between the parties in the system can also be an expression of low sophistication or even of “satisficing” in survey responses (Krosnick 1991). This low sophistication, in turn, can be related with low support for liberal democratic values, potentially biasing our results. Thus, we estimated new models after dropping 10% of the respondents closest to the value zero in each of the measures of polarisation (the value of the lowest 10 percentile is 0.227 for WPIP and 0.965 for IE). This means that a total of 6,577 cases were dropped. We also control in this model for political interest and education as we did with all the preceding models. The results in Table 3A ,column

2 (for the results with the GAM estimation see Table 4A in the appendix) and visualizations (Figures 2A and 4A in the appendix) confirm the degree, direction and nature of the relationships we observed of both measures of polarisation with support to liberal democratic principles, although there is some reduction of the adjusted R^2 .

Discussion

This study addresses two different implications of ideological polarisation for support to liberal democratic principles. One flows from the Sartorian tradition, which argues that in situations of high polarisation, the legitimacy of the political system is likely to be widely questioned. The other flows from the Downsian tradition, which argues for some level of polarisation to generate ‘party differential’ or ‘electoral decidability’ in the party supply. While these may seem at odds with one another, we found that both hold some power in explaining how ideological polarisation is related to democratic legitimacy.

In the preceding pages, we have approached this theoretical and empirical puzzle by exploring the relationship between two different indicators of political polarisation and support for democracy. The first is IE, which measures the extent to which citizens’ place themselves in the most extreme positions of the ideological scale in their political systems, reflecting a “demand-side” of polarisation. The second is WPIP, which results from where individuals locate political parties in that same scale relative to one another and reflects their perception of the extent to which party system supply is ideologically polarized.

Our results indicate that individual ideological extremism tends to have an exponentially negative relationship with principled support for liberal democracy. This result suggests that extremism is perhaps more a matter of “kind” than of “degree”. In other words, individuals that are “moderately” distant from the ideological average positions in their societies are no more and no less likely to reject liberal democratic principles: it is only when

that distance becomes significantly large — i.e., “extreme” — that democratic support starts decreasing precipitously. This also fits well with the directional model of voting, which considers that distance from the ideological centre tends to have intensifying effects on preferences and behaviour.

Additionally, our results confirm that perceived ideological polarization in the party system shows an ‘inverted-U’ relationship with democratic support, thus reflecting the argument that both low and high levels of polarisation of parties can have negative implications for democratic legitimacy. This occurs as this measure of perceived polarisation contains information on the level of ‘party differential’ or ‘electoral decidability’ of the party supply, which is absent in the other indicator—individual IE. As hypothesised by Bartolini (1990 and 2000), Przeworski (2019) and others, low levels of party differential also seem to make citizens question the legitimacy of democratic competition. The combination of these findings helps reconcile two apparently contradictory arguments in the literature about party system polarisation and its potential consequences for democracy.

We believe that this discussion and the evidence presented will shed light on the current debate about the potential consequences of increasing levels of polarisation observed in numerous contemporary democracies. According to our research, from the supply perspective, *some* amount of polarisation may contribute to democratic legitimacy in the context of profound economic and social crisis by offering citizens a way to vent their growing discontent. Problems could arise if this polarisation reaches a very high level and even more so if this is connected with the increasing levels of individuals’ ideological extremism from the demand side. This combination might present a more serious threat to representative democracies. Thus, to the extent that public support does indeed help democracy survive (Claassen 2020b), this seems to depend not only on the presence of low ideological polarisation among the citizenry but also a moderate level of (perceived) polarisation in the party supply.

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