


LETTER

Young People Punish Undemocratic Behaviour Less Than Older People

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Abstract

Are young people less likely to punish undemocratic behaviour? I employ experimental data from five studies, ten countries, and seventeen unique country-year samples to reassess the proposition that young people are less committed to democracy than older people. The studies consist of four conjoint and one vignette experiments, which permit estimating an interaction between undemocratic candidate behaviour and respondent age on voting intentions. I find the interaction between undemocratic behaviour and age is negative – such that punishment of undemocratic behaviour increases with age – in all studies and almost all country samples. Moreover, the interaction is approximately linear and statistically significant in the pooled sample and most studies. Thus, young people are less likely to sanction undemocratic behaviour than older people. This letter contributes with the hitherto most comprehensive empirical contribution on age differences in commitment to democracy judging from punishment of undemocratic behaviour.

Keywords: undemocratic behaviour; age; voting behaviour; democratic backsliding; survey experiments

Introduction

Whether young people are less committed to democracy than older people remains a disputed issue (Alexander and Welzel 2017; Foa and Mounk 2016; Norris 2017; Voeten 2017; Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2022). Some scholars have argued that young people are growing tired of democracy because it does not perform well (Foa and Mounk 2016). Others have counter-argued that growing up in democratic contexts has made younger generations more committed to democracy than older generations (Alexander and Welzel 2017; Norris 2017). However, what these prior studies have in common is that they all focus on support for abstract democratic principles. Thus, we lack knowledge of young people's commitment to democracy in relation to the most frequent type of democratic breakdown today: the subversion of democracy by elected incumbents in countries such as Hungary, Turkey, Poland, and Venezuela (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). We do not know if young people are less likely than older people to hold anti-democratic forces accountable for their actions.

In this letter, I employ experimental data from five studies, ten countries, and seventeen country-year samples, which all permit linking sanctioning of undemocratic behaviour to respondent age. The experiments specifically gauge commitment to democracy by whether respondents punish undemocratic politicians through their vote in election scenarios (see Svobik 2019). The data covers Brazil, the Czech Republic, India, Italy, Mexico, Poland, South Africa, South Korea, the United States, and the United Kingdom. I find comprehensive evidence for the proposition that young people are less committed to democracy than older people. The

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negative effect of undemocratic behaviour – which consists of violations of the key democratic principles of free and fair elections, civil liberties, and checks and balances – increases with age in all five studies and fifteen out of seventeen country samples. This interaction is statistically significant in most studies and strongly significant in the pooled sample, regardless of whether random or country-year/study fixed effects are employed. Moreover, comparing a linear estimation with a flexible kernel estimator (Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu 2019), I show that the interaction between undemocratic behaviour and age is approximately linear in the pooled sample.

This paper contributes empirically with a comprehensive experimental assessment of the proposition that young people are less committed to democracy than older people. The evidence should not be seen as supporting or rejecting theoretical arguments made by prior studies on support for democracy (Alexander and Welzel 2017; Foa and Mounk 2016; Norris 2017; Voeten 2017; Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2022), as I wish to make an empirical contribution from a new perspective, namely sanctioning of undemocratic behaviour. This perspective is particularly important because support for abstract democratic principles may be insufficient to judge whether citizens are willing to defend democracy in the voting booth (Graham and Svulik 2020; Svulik 2019; Wuttke 2022). I thus integrate the recently burgeoning literature on whether citizens punish politicians electorally for violating democratic principles (Carey et al. 2022; Frederiksen 2022; Graham and Svulik 2020; Saikkonen and Christensen 2022; Svulik 2019) with studies on age differences in support for democracy (Alexander and Welzel 2017; Foa and Mounk 2016; Norris 2017; Voeten 2017; Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2022) by showing that younger people are less committed to democracy when it comes to holding undemocratic politicians accountable for their actions.

Research Design and Data

The data consists of five experimental studies, which I conducted between 2020 and 2022. The studies include four conjoint experiments with ten country-year samples and one vignette experiment with seven country-year samples. Although pre-registered, this was not for the purpose of testing whether young people are less committed to democracy. This makes the comprehensive scope of the data even more important as we need to rule out that idiosyncratic findings of individual studies were cherry-picked for the purpose of this letter (Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2022). Using all of these studies to test the proposition that young people punish undemocratic behaviour less may be more ethically defensible than conducting new, pre-registered studies as that would imply collecting more data from respondents than is strictly necessary to test the proposition. Table 1 summarizes the studies in terms of included countries, year of fielding, design, number of tasks, number of respondents, and number of candidate observations.

All studies manipulated undemocratic candidate behaviour in election scenarios, measured respondent age, and had voting intentions as the outcome. The four conjoint experiments follow a paired-profile logic where undemocratic behaviour was assigned randomly for the two candidate profiles independently. Studies 1 and 2 included ten paired-profile scenario tasks, whereas Studies 4 and 5 had fifteen and eighteen tasks, respectively. The vignette experiment was a single-

Table 1. Included studies

Study	Countries	Years	Design	Tasks	Respondents	Observations
1	US, UK, Czech Republic, Mexico, South Korea	2020	Conjoint	10	13,922	265,225
2	US	2021 × 2	Conjoint	10	942	18,636
3	US, Mexico, India, Italy, Brazil, South Africa, Poland	2021	Vignette	1	6,888	6,888
4	US	2021	Conjoint	15	802	16,500
5	UK	2022 × 2	Conjoint	18	2,149	73,778

profile, single-task experiment in which respondents were asked to evaluate a political leader from their party who did or did not violate democratic principles without variation in any other candidate attribute. This differs from the conjoint experiments, which all assign several candidate attributes beyond undemocratic behaviour.

All experiments assigned one democratic or undemocratic behaviour to each candidate profile. Therefore, I employ a binary indicator of democratic/undemocratic behaviour that is consistent across the studies. The undemocratic behaviours include violations of the democratic cornerstones of free and fair elections, civil liberties, and/or checks and balances. These violations typically consist of incremental violations such as gerrymandering, altering the media landscape in one's favour, or ignoring court rulings (Graham and Svobik 2020). All undemocratic behaviours and information about which study they were used in are included, along with illustrations of treatment scenarios and ethical considerations, in Appendix A.

Regarding the outcome, the measures of voting intentions vary slightly between the studies. Studies 1 and 3 employed a five-point scale, asking respondents how likely they would be to vote for each candidate; Study 2 used a similar seven-point voting likelihood scale; and Studies 2 and 5 employed a forced-choice outcome, asking respondents to select between the candidate profiles in an election scenario. I rescale all outcomes to 0–1 such that 0 signals not selecting the candidate (forced-choice) or a low likelihood of voting for the candidate (scales). Correspondingly, 1 signals selecting the candidate (forced-choice) or a high likelihood of voting for the candidate (scales).

Studies 1, 3, 4, and 5 were fielded with Lucid, whereas Study 2 was fielded with Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). These platforms have different advantages and challenges. MTurk respondents largely consist of professional survey takers, and the platform suffers somewhat from fraudulent respondent behaviour. On the other hand, Lucid recruits respondents from a diverse set of sources – even mobile games (Ternovski and Orr 2022). Therefore, respondents on Lucid are less professional and more similar to respondents of nationally representative surveys than MTurkers (Coppock and McClellan 2019; Ternovski and Orr 2022). Indeed, the samples for Studies 1, 3, 4, and 5 meet nationally representative quotas on gender and age.

However, using Lucid entails other challenges – in particular, inattentiveness, which has increased with exploding demands for data from online surveys during and after the pandemic (Ternovski and Orr 2022). As expected, Study 2 suffers more from professional survey-taking and lack of representativeness, whereas the remaining studies are challenged by inattentiveness. Although this provides a good point of departure for checking whether the results hold across different types of respondents, I draw on additional data sources – for example, YouGov, pre-pandemic Lucid, and the Russian Election Study – from other studies in Appendix D (see also the Robustness Checks and Auxiliary Analyses section).

Estimation and Modelling

I estimate the average effects of the binary undemocratic behaviour indicator and the interaction between this indicator and respondent age using OLS regression with respondent-clustered standard errors (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). I do this for each country-year sample, for each study, and for the pooled sample. When examining the pooled sample, I estimate country-year and study fixed effects as well as random effects to avoid relying strictly on assumptions about whether the interaction between undemocratic behaviour and age varies across contexts (Incerti 2020; Schwarz and Coppock 2022).

I rely on a simple measure of age in years rather than a generational measure, as the data does not allow disentangling life-cycle effects from generational effects because it has no temporal component (Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2022). Moreover, I estimate the interaction with age linearly. This linear approximation allows me to rely on one single estimand and show comparable estimates across studies. I complement the linear model with a flexible kernel estimator

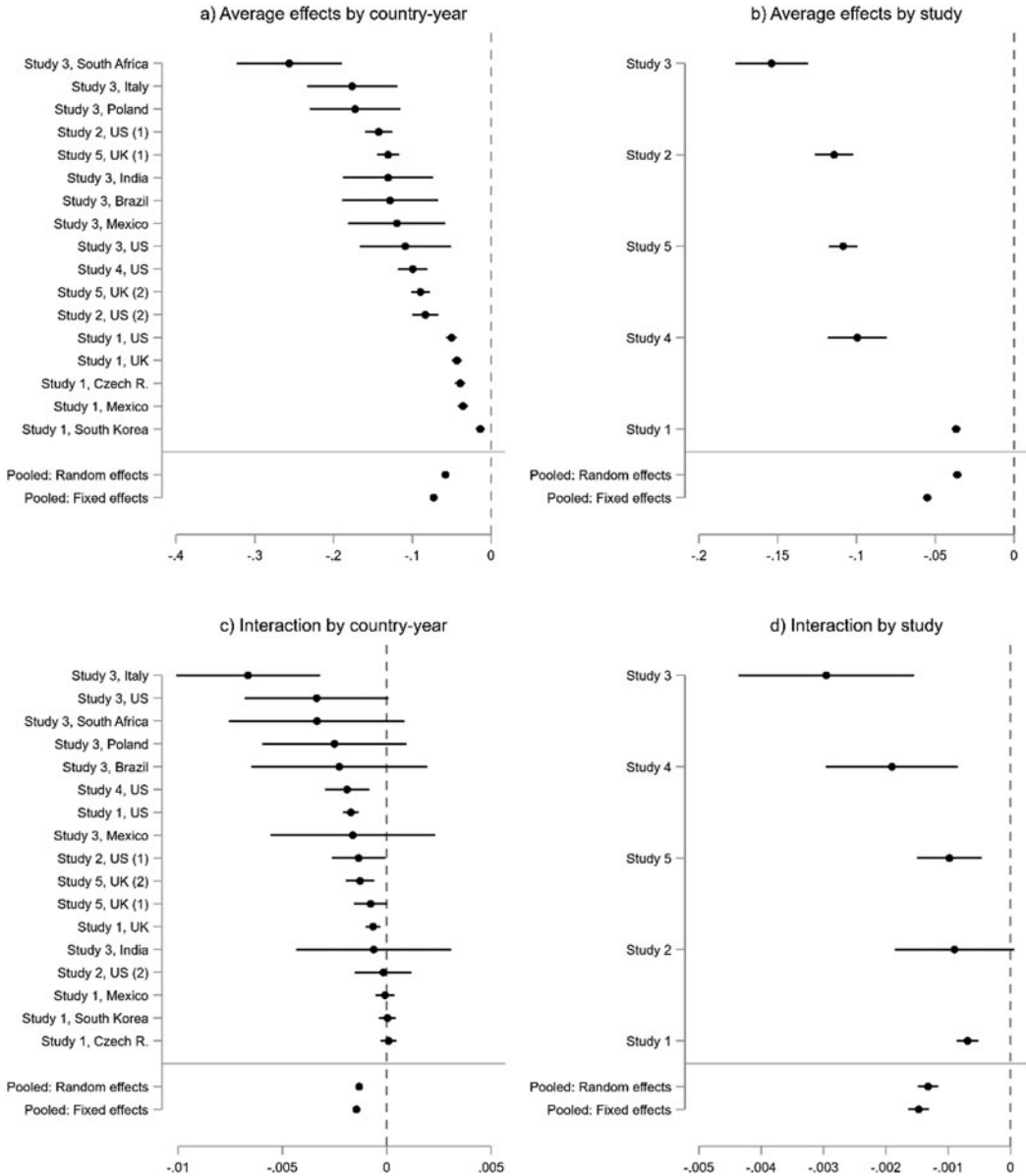


Figure 1. Average effects of undemocratic behaviour on voting intentions and interaction between undemocratic behaviour and age across country-year samples and studies.

provided by Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu (2019) when illustrating the pooled results to check the linearity assumption. The proposition that young people are less committed to democracy gains support if the negative effects of undemocratic behaviour increase with age, generally corroborated by negative interaction terms between undemocratic behaviour and age.

Young People Punish Undemocratic Behaviour Less

Figure 1 shows the average effects of undemocratic behaviour on voting intentions (upper row) and the linear interaction between undemocratic behaviour and age in years (lower row). The left

column shows the results for each of the seventeen country-year samples, whereas the right column shows the results for each of the five studies. The upper row shows that undemocratic behaviour produces significant negative effects in all country-year samples and studies. The effects vary between 1.5 and 25.5 percentage points. The pooled random and fixed effects estimates yield effect sizes between what corresponds to a 3.5–5.5 percentage points loss in vote share for undemocratic candidates.

Turning to the direct test of the proposition that young people punish undemocratic behaviour less, the lower row of Fig. 1 largely shows that the negative effect of undemocratic behaviour increases with age, thus supporting the proposition. All studies yield negative interaction coefficients, whereas all but two country-year samples produce negative coefficients. Four out of five study-based interaction coefficients are statistically significant, whereas seven out of seventeen country-year-based coefficients are significant. All four pooled estimates are significantly negative, with $p < 0.001$. These rather unambiguous results for the study-level and pooled sample estimates are important, as individual country-year samples may not be sufficiently well-powered.

Relatedly, Study 3 simultaneously provides the largest and most statistically uncertain coefficients. The statistical uncertainty is because the vignette experiment is less well-powered than the conjoint experiments, which provide multiple observations per respondent. The study-level coefficient for Study 3 is, in fact, numerically very large and significant statistically. Thus, the finding that young people punish undemocratic behaviour less does not seem to be exclusive to the vignette or conjoint experiments. Moreover, there is no tendency for the findings to be particular to any specific country or region. We find old democracies among the countries with the largest age differences (Italy and some US samples), with medium-sized age differences (UK samples), and with the smallest age differences (other US samples). Similarly, younger democracies such as South Africa and Poland are found among those with the strongest differences, whereas South Korea and the Czech Republic yield the smallest differences.

To assess how substantive the age differences are, Fig. 2 shows the pooled random effects estimates graphically. Illustrations of the fixed effects estimates, which are very similar to the random effects estimates, are included in Appendix B. I complement the linear model with a flexible kernel estimator and include underlying age histograms to document common support in the interaction (Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu 2019).¹ I illustrate the results for respondents below eighty-five years as there is a lack of common support for respondents aged eighty-five and above, who constitute 0.2 per cent of the data. Depending on which model we focus on, the estimates suggest that the oldest people punish undemocratic behaviour by an effect corresponding to an 8–12 percentage point loss in vote share. By contrast, the youngest people punish undemocratic behaviour by a minuscule 0.5–1 percentage point. Therefore, the differences in effects between young and older people are substantial. Moreover, the kernel estimate shows that the interaction is quite linear.

In sum, I find comprehensive and rather consistent support for the proposition that young people punish undemocratic behaviour less than older people. The adverse effects of undemocratic behaviour on voting intentions are smallest among the youngest, strongest among the oldest, and generally increase substantially with age.

Robustness Checks and Auxiliary Analyses

In Appendix C, I provide a series of robustness checks and auxiliary analyses that deal with the issue of respondent attentiveness in different ways, as we may suspect that the effects of undemocratic behaviour are attenuated for young people because they are less attentive to surveys (Ternovski and Orr 2022). First, I show that the results are robust to controlling for attentiveness. Second, I show that the results are fairly similar for inattentive and attentive respondents. Third, I

¹The bandwidth of the kernel estimator (6.6) was automatically selected using cross-validation.

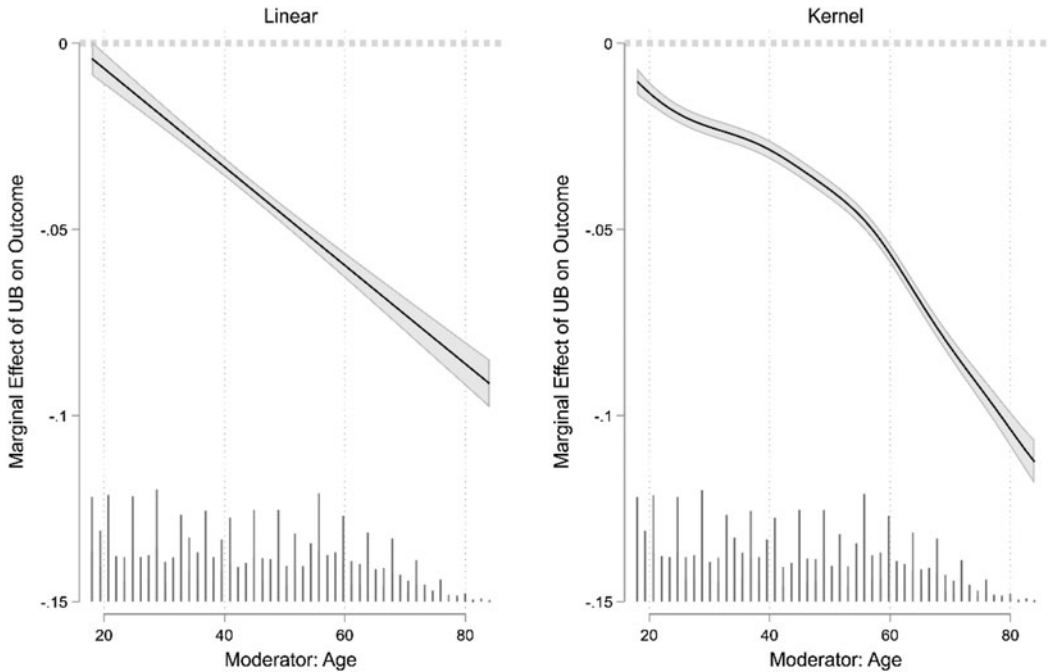


Figure 2. Illustration of interaction between undemocratic behaviour (UB) and age on voting intentions. Random effects.

investigate whether age differences are similar to other factors, such that effects increase with age regardless of what we estimate the effects of. I estimate the effects of other controversial candidate attributes, such as anti-redistributive and anti-minority/nativist behaviour and the effects of partisanship and policy agreement between respondents and candidates. I manipulated or measured these factors in Studies 1, 2, and 4. Partisanship was also measured in Study 5.

Unlike the effects of undemocratic behaviour, age differences in the effects of policy agreement are heterogeneous across studies. These effects increase with age in Studies 1 and 4 but decrease with age in Study 2. The negative effects of anti-minority or nativist behaviour – which includes restrictions on immigrants, abortion, and gay marriage – are clearly largest among young people and decrease with age. The effects of anti-redistributive behaviour are largely homogeneous across age but – if anything – also tend to decrease with age. Finally, the effects of partisanship increase with age, but – given the remainder of the evidence speaking against differences being due to attentiveness – this may simply be because young people are less attached to parties than older people (Dalton and Weldon 2007, 185). In sum, the results are robust to accounting for survey attentiveness, whereas age differences on effects of several other factors follow patterns that are distinct from the differences related to sanctioning of undemocratic behaviour. Thus, survey attentiveness does not seem to attenuate the effects of undemocratic behaviour among young people.

In Appendix D, I conduct an additional analysis, where I draw on available data from eight related published studies (Aarslew 2023; Carey et al. 2022; Graham and Svulik 2020; Krishnarajan 2023; Lewandowsky and Jankowski 2023; Mares and Visconti 2020; Reuter and Szakonyi 2021; Saikkonen and Christensen 2022), which, among other sources, include data from YouGov, pre-pandemic Lucid, and the Russian Election Study. This additional analysis shows that the results are robust to using survey platforms other than Lucid and MTurk, as the interaction between undemocratic behaviour and age – compared with the original pooled effects shown in Fig. 1 – are even stronger when pooled across these other studies. Finally, in

Appendix E I show that the findings are quite externally robust to possible differences between the included samples and populations of interest using the the approach proposed by Devaux and Egami (2022).

Conclusion and Discussion

Various studies have grappled with the question of whether young people support democracy less than older people (Alexander and Welzel 2017; Foa and Mounk 2016; Norris 2017; Voeten 2017; Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2022). This letter adds a component focused on punishment of undemocratic behaviour, which relates to the most frequent cause of democratic breakdown today – incumbent-driven subversion of democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Przeworski 2019; Svulik 2019). I have added this component by complementing studies on age differences in support of democracy with an approach employed by a recent stream of research focused on sanctioning of undemocratic behaviour (Carey et al. 2022; Frederiksen 2022; Graham and Svulik 2020; Saikkonen and Christensen 2022). This approach reveals how committed young people are to democracy when it really counts – in the voting booth (Svulik 2019). I specifically provided a test of the proposition that young people punish undemocratic behaviour less than older people using comprehensive experimental data. The findings show that young people are less likely to sanction undemocratic behaviour than older people and that this interaction is fairly linear.

The mechanism as to why young people sanction undemocratic behaviour less remains an important question. The auxiliary analyses may be seen as evidence that differences in survey attentiveness – or attentiveness to undemocratic behaviour in the real world – are not a mechanism through which age matters for sanctioning of undemocratic behaviour. Meanwhile, young people do not appear to place more weight on partisanship or policy preferences, which also are possible mechanisms that limit sanctioning of undemocratic behaviour (Graham and Svulik 2020). However, as the auxiliary analyses show reverse age differences in punishment of anti-minority or nativist behaviour, it may be possible that young people prioritize punishing anti-minority or nativist behaviour over undemocratic behaviour.

Relatedly, the analysis provided here does not allow conclusively disentangling generational effects from life-cycle effects because the data does not have a temporal component (Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2022). However, the aforementioned supplementary analyses showing reverse age differences in the effects of other factors may be interpreted as suggestive evidence of a generational effect. One plausible life-cycle mechanism would be that lower punishment of undemocratic behaviour reflects lower political engagement among young people. For example, we know that turnout eventually increases through life (Jennings and Niemi 1981). If this mechanism is true – that is, if young people just do not care about politics and this changes as they grow older – we should also expect to see weaker effects of other factors among young people. Yet, we see that young people place greater emphasis on punishing anti-minority or nativist behaviour and perhaps also on punishing anti-redistributive behaviour.

Therefore, young people seem to care about different political matters than older people rather than not care about politics at all, which is more suggestive of a generational divide reflecting different priorities than a life-cycle effect reflecting increasing engagement. A generational effect would be severe for democracy, implying that younger, less committed generations replace older, more committed generations (Foa and Mounk 2016). Examining this suggestive stance in favour of generational effects regarding punishment of undemocratic behaviour is crucial for future research.

Supplementary Material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123423000649>

Data availability statement. Replication data for this paper can be found at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/DWUHRI> (Frederiksen 2023)

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Competing interests. None.

Ethical standards. This research complies with the Declaration of Helsinki and APSA's Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research. For further discussion of research ethics, see Appendix A in the online appendices.

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