People Consistently View Elections and Civil Liberties as Key Components of Democracy

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Abstract

How do people around the world define democracy? Answering this question is critical as countries face democratic backsliding and authoritarian governments promote alternative notions of democracy. Indeed, some scholars argue that people from different backgrounds understand democracy differently. In contrast, we discover strikingly consistent views on what constitutes a "democratic" country from our conjoint survey experiments conducted in the United States, Italy, Egypt, India, Thailand, and Japan. People in these countries *(N = 6150)* and across a diverse range of subgroups similarly emphasize free and fair elections and civil liberties as key determinants of democracy. Countries that produce desirable social and economic outcomes are also considered more democratic, but these and other factors exert a smaller and less consistent effect than elections and civil liberties.

Democracy is under pressure within and across societies. Democratic backsliding, or the erosion of democratic norms and institutions, has occurred worldwide over the past decade, including in long-standing democracies like the United States and India (*1, 2*). Meanwhile, powerful autocracies, including China and Russia, have increasingly contested the influence of democracy in the international system (*3, 4*). Nevertheless, despite these global challenges to democracy, most people in most countries still say they want their government to be democratic (*5*).

Is this expressed support for democracy rooted in consensus about what democracy is? Most scholars conceptualize democracy as a political system in which key political leaders are selected through competitive elections and citizens' core civil liberties are protected from unconstrained government power (*6, 7*). We adhere to this view in this article. Yet, because of democracy's widespread appeal and global importance, its definition has been contested constantly (*8, 9*). Authoritarian political leaders have tried to reorient people's understanding of democracy to reflect their own approaches to governance (*10, 11*). Meanwhile, within democratic countries, politicians and citizens have tussled over the meaning of democracy (*12*. Despite this contestation, some researchers have argued that most people think about democracy similarly (*13*). However, others conclude that understandings of democracy differ dramatically across and within countries (*14—16*). These studies arrive at their conclusion by applying a variety of statistical models on observational survey data collected worldwide.

Measuring the extent to which people differ in their understanding of democracy is important because democracy is more likely to survive when more citizens are willing to support and defend it (*17, 18*), especially in the face of political leaders who try to subvert it (*19*). For the public to effectively defend democracy, however, people must agree on what democracy is and what constitutes a democratic violation that deserves sanctioning (*20*). If many citizens subscribe to nontraditional or authoritarian redefinitions of democracy, actual democracy can weaken even if most people express support for democratic governance (*21*). For these reasons, researchers have sought to identify how people understand democracy and how these understandings relate to voter behavior under the shadow of democratic backsliding (*22, 23*). Yet, as documented in a recent review article about popular conceptions of democracy, this large but fragmented body of research has left firm conclusions elusive (*7*). Consequently, our main research question asks: what do citizens mean when they say they want "democratic" governance across different

countries? In answering this question, we explicitly do not assume that people from different backgrounds prioritize one particular definition of democracy and thus are a priori agnostic as to which definition of democracy is more widely accepted.

More specifically, we examine the extent to which people adopt eight different definitions of democracy emphasized in this literature (Table 1): electoral, liberal, institutional, populist, loyalist, substantive (which we disaggregate into economic and gender subcomponents), technocratic, and direct democracy. Existing research argues that each of these definitions is relevant to how some members of the public understand democracy (*24*). The first three understandings of democracy are emphasized by mainstream scholarship, which defines democracy in terms of the procedures determining who can wield power while limiting how that power can be used (*6*). First, an electoral understanding focuses on the existence of free, fair, and competitive elections for political leaders as a defining characteristic of democracy. Second, people may also view democracy as a shorthand for liberal democracy, and thus highlight the importance of protecting individual civil liberties, including free speech and protections from unjust government coercion, as a fundamental feature of a democratic country. Third, institutional democracy focuses on the checks and balances within the government that limit executive power, including constraints from the legislature and judiciary. Together, these electoral, liberal, and institutional elements capture the traditional conceptualization of what it means for a government to be democratic.

This traditional understanding of democracy is often contested by authoritarian regimes and political leaders seeking to undermine existing democracies. In attempting to redefine or reorient understanding of democracy toward standards they can more plausibly claim to uphold (*15*), these actors emphasize two strategies.

One strategy involves redefining democracy in authoritarian terms. Such "authoritarian democracy" involves an unchecked ruler who represents the popular will and commands the obedience of the people (*7, 15, 25, 26*). According to this literature, citizens adopting this authoritarian understanding of democracy will have the opposite perspective on institutional democracy: whereas the traditional view sees constraints on the executive as democratic, the authoritarian view sees constraints as impeding a leader from truly representing the people. Likewise, citizens subscribing to this view may focus on whether the leader's policies represent the majority's will (*27*). We follow existing research in naming this populist democracy (*7*). A

final key component in this authoritarian redefinition emphasizes citizen loyalty and obedience to the government, whereas under the traditional understanding of democracy, citizens are generally expected to follow the rules but not obey rulers (*15*). We call this loyalist democracy. Citizens adopting this perspective will evaluate countries as more democratic when citizens avoid challenging the government.

The second strategy reorients democracy toward the outcomes and quality of policy and governance. The argument goes that a truly democratic political system produces "good" outcomes for the people (*28*). We refer to this notion as a substantive understanding of democracy and focus on two particular outcomes salient in many societies today, economic and gender (social) equality. Scholars claim that substantive understandings of democracy are especially prevalent in non-Western societies, (*13, 29, 30*). Relatedly, to achieve such good outcomes, some people believe that democracy must incorporate expert opinion into the decision-making process (*31*), which is termed technocratic (or stealth) democracy. People adopting these perspectives will question whether a society is democratic simply because it has elected leaders and political rights if policies do not serve the people. If this understanding is widespread, leaders who govern effectively can point to their technocratic performance as evidence of the regime's democratic nature. Lastly, we examine an eighth aspect of democracy that emphasizes the ability of citizens to have a direct say over governance decisions, which includes the frequency and ease of referenda and other forms of direct democracy (*5*, *32*). This understanding of democracy reflects a theoretical ideal of democracy in its original and purest form, which we include for its important place in the conceptual literature on democracy.

[Table-1]

Methods

The present study fills a gap in comparative knowledge of how people understand democracy by drawing on novel experimental data from surveys implemented in a diverse range of six countries. These countries—Egypt, India, Italy, Japan, Thailand, and the United States—span different political regime types, democratic histories, geographic regions, levels of development, and cultural backgrounds (SM Section A).

Within our surveys, we used a paired conjoint experiment to assess how people think about which countries qualify as democracies. Respondents were presented with profiles of two

hypothetical countries, which contained information about nine attributes linked to the eight aforementioned aspects of democracy emphasized in the literature (Table 1). Respondents then determined which hypothetical country was more democratic. This design reflects an important innovation because conjoint experiments are well-suited for ascertaining which factors people prioritize when comparatively evaluating various attributes within multidimensional concepts like democracy (*7, 12, 16, 23, 33—35*). Unlike existing survey questions that ask about a single dimension, the conjoint allows us to independently vary correlated attributes, such as elections and civil liberties, which people would otherwise assume go together (36). Also important, the real-world contest over democracy involves comparison, as does the paired-conjoint task. Countries like China, Russia, and Egypt argue that they are just as, if not more, democratic than Western democracies (*10, 26, 37*), and they justify these claims by pointing to features of their governance that we incorporate into our design. Furthermore, the conjoint experiment helps to mitigate social desirability bias arising from respondents who may feel compelled to choose the "right" answer, which pervades straightforward survey questions, including ranking questions (*34, 38*). These advantages allow us to build on existing studies by providing a clearer assessment of how people in different societies and of different backgrounds understand democracy.

We implemented our conjoint experiment with samples collected through Qualtrics in the United States (n = 1024, 54% women, mean age = 49 with SD = 18), Italy (n = 1047, 51% women, mean age = 46 with SD = 15), Egypt (n = 1008, 49% women, mean age = 37 with SD = 13), India (n = 1022, 44% women, mean age = 36 with SD = 13), Thailand (n = 1037, 51% women, mean age = 39 with SD = 13), and Japan (n = 1012, 51% women, mean age = 50 with SD = 15) from May to September 2023. The sampling strategy used demographic quotas drawn from census statistics regarding age, gender, and where possible, educational attainment. Within the conjoint exercise, each attribute was independently and randomly assigned one of three possible values (e.g., for elections, whether the country chose its leaders via free or fair elections, biased elections, or no elections). The attributes were randomly ordered at the survey-respondent level. After viewing the pair of country profiles, respondents were asked to select the one they viewed as more democratic (forced choice) and to rate the extent of each country's democracy on a scale of 1 to 10. Respondents repeated this task three times, evaluating a total of six profiles. (SM Section A provides a detailed discussion of research procedures including question-wording

and reliability, pre-registration, attrition rates, and additional methodology description and justification.)

Results

Our analysis shows how people understand democracy by identifying the factors they prioritize when deciding which countries are more democratic. Following our pre-registration, we estimate the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) of randomized country attributes on the probability of selecting a country as more democratic (*39, 40*). Panel A of Figure 1 summarizes this analysis for our six-country sample, while Panel B additionally shows the salience of each attribute (*41, 42*). Figure 2 disaggregates the analysis by showing the estimated AMCEs for each country we surveyed, and the supplementary materials demonstrate the robustness of our findings in four additional analyses: using the rating outcome, excluding atypical country profiles, correcting potential measurement error bias, and using logistic regression with survey weights *(43, 44)*.

[Figure-1]

Our first major finding is that electoral and liberal understandings of democracy produce the largest effects in the full sample and rank in the top three dimensions contributing to evaluation of democracy in all six countries (*45*). People are more likely to view countries that select their leaders through free and fair elections as more democratic than countries without elections by an average of 17 percentage points (pp) in the aggregate sample and 13 to 20 pp across the six countries. Civil liberties has a comparable impact. People are more likely to view countries with strong protections for civil liberties as more democratic compared to countries without such protections by about 16 pp overall and 13 to 21 pp across the six countries. Electoral and liberal democracy are also the most salient attributes (Fig. 1, Panel B). Within these attributes, free and fair elections and strong protections for civil liberties rank as the top two attribute-levels in the experiment (*46*; *47*).

In contrast, the third component of "traditional" definitions of democracy, institutional democracy, exerts a substantially weaker effect on people's evaluations. Countries in which the leader must respect the legislature and courts' authority in decision-making are 7 to 14 pp more likely to be perceived as more democratic, compared to countries in which the leader can almost

always bypass the legislative and judicial branches when making decisions. Institutional democracy ranks fifth in attribute salience.

Taken together, these estimates suggest that elections and civil liberties are consistently understood as the most important indicators of whether a country is democratic, while institutional checks and balances are significant but not as substantial of a factor. We now assess the attributes related to other understandings of democracy that would benefit authoritarian political leaders. Some of these attributes also influence people's evaluations, but to a lesser and less consistent degree. First, we find little evidence that an "authoritarian" redefinition of democracy has taken root. The data do not support the narrative that societies with unconstrained leaders (inverted institutional democracy) who appeal to truly representing the people (populist democracy) and command mass obedience (loyalist democracy) are perceived as more democratic. Of the three factors, only the populist attribute has a moderately sized effect, as societies in which the leader frequently follows the majority's preferences are about 10 pp more likely to be viewed as democratic.

We find some evidence consistent with reorienting democracy toward the quality of outcomes. Whether experts influence policymaking has little impact on evaluations of how democratic a country is. However, after elections and liberties, the two most important attributes are the gender and then economic components of substantive democracy. In the full sample, countries in which men and women have equal rights are more likely to be seen as democratic than countries with highly unequal gender rights by 14 pp. Effects range from 8 to 19 pp across the six countries, reflecting a substantive impact close to free elections and protected liberties. Gender equality is among the top three most important attributes in India, Italy, Japan, and Thailand, though it has less importance in Egypt and the United States. Meanwhile, relative equality between the rich and poor (compared to high inequality) increases the likelihood that a country is seen as more democratic by 10 pp. These effects range from 6 to 14 pp across countries. Economic equality ranks fourth in attribute salience after free elections, civil liberties, and gender equality, though it is not among the top three most important attributes anywhere. Finally, citizens are generally more likely to see countries in which they can directly vote on policies as more democratic (direct democracy), but this factor is substantially less impactful than the others.

[Figure-2]

The country-by-country analysis suggests that people from the six very different countries we sampled prioritize a similar set of attributes—especially elections and civil liberties—when evaluating whether a country is democratic (fig. 2). We also find that citizens living in our sample's democracies and autocracies similarly view elections and civil liberties as the key components of democracy (SM Section G).

Strikingly, respondents hold similar conceptions of democracy not only across countries but also within countries (fig. 3). We analyze the differences in marginal means of the probability of selecting a country as more democratic across six pairs of subgroups: individuals younger vs. older than 40, females vs. males, college-educated vs. not college-educated, minority vs. non-minority, rightwing vs. leftwing individuals, and pro-China vs. pro-US individuals. These results show that elections and civil liberties are similarly important for how democracy is conceptualized across a diverse range of people within their societies. Country-by-country analyses of these subgroups produce the same conclusions (SM Section I). The handful of subgroups showing modest differences are discussed in SM Section I.

[Figure-3]

Discussion

We find that people across six very different countries consistently emphasize competitive elections and civil liberties as key determinants of what makes a country democratic. The relevance of these two factors also persists regardless of an individual's age, gender, education, minority status, political ideology, or preferences for a democratic or authoritarian hegemon in the international system.

This consistency across and within countries contrasts with existing studies emphasizing the prevalence of alternative conceptualizations of democracy reflecting authoritarian redefinitions or a reorientation toward substantial outcomes (*15, 21, 48, 49*), and with studies finding heterogeneous understandings of democracy along demographic and ideological lines (*16, 50*). We provide a breakthrough in this debate by using a novel conjoint survey design well-suited for disentangling multidimensional concepts, providing a clearer picture of how people understand democracy in various national contexts (SM Section K discusses our research design with respect to the literature).

This consistency has implications for the resilience of democracy over the last century (*51*). A prerequisite for democratic stability is that citizens share a common understanding of what constitutes democracy and can thus punish undemocratic behavior (*20*). We provide fresh evidence of this prerequisite being met. Since people broadly agree on the centrality of elections and liberties to democracy, visible attempts to undermine or ignore these facets are likely to be widely recognized as anti-democratic. If people continue to prefer democracy, this clarity should make it easier to mobilize opposition in response. To avoid this backlash, political leaders engaged in backsliding will often try to undermine elections and liberties subtly while claiming deceptively to uphold these facets of the political system more strongly than their opposition (*52*).

Next, we also find that outright authoritarian understandings of democracy are not widely accepted. The presence of an unchecked ruler or the extent to which people obey the government have little bearing on how people evaluate democracy. This result suggests that attempts by authoritarian governments to redefine democracy's core elements have not been successful, even within authoritarian countries like Egypt or Thailand. Thus, our findings should assuage concerns about authoritarian redefinitions of democracy managing to "overshadow" conceptualization of democracy rooted in elections and liberties (*15*). They also shed light on why authoritarian regimes often try to acquire democratic legitimacy by adopting institutions like elections (*53*).

However, we identify two main dimensions most likely to weaken democracy as it is traditionally understood. First, institutional constraints on the leader have a smaller effect on evaluations of democracy, compared to elections and liberties. This weaker leg of the triad implies that undermining checks and balances is less likely to provoke public backlash than removing elections or civil liberties.

Second, many people do consider substantive outcomes--especially gender equality and, to a lesser extent, economic equality—in their evaluations of democracy. This finding may reflect the extent to which understandings of democracy have broadened and the term has become associated with "good governance" generally (*16*). These two substantive outcomes produced less consistent and smaller effects across the six countries, so our conclusions regarding competitive elections and civil liberties remain. Nonetheless, the results suggest that authoritarian political leaders can highlight their performance to muddy the waters about the

undemocratic nature of their regime. Indeed, autocrats often emphasize reforms promoting gender equality to paint their regimes as more democratic (*54*). Recent research also shows that Chinese citizens exposed to political messaging about the government's redistributive efforts evaluate China's democracy more positively (*55*). As a result, though people generally agree that elections and liberties are key determinants of democracy, autocracies have some leeway to present their governance as democratic by demonstrating a commitment to improving social and economic outcomes.

Future Research and Limitations

The present study examines diverse samples of citizens in Egypt, India, Italy, Japan, Thailand, and the United States but does not cover countries in South America and Africa. Given the modest heterogeneity in our results, we believe our key findings should generalize to other regions, though this can only be ascertained by replicating our study in other areas. Researchers might also explore authoritarian contexts like China and Vietnam, where information is much more tightly controlled, though these cases are not the norm of authoritarian governance today. With more intensive exposure to authoritarian viewpoints, understanding of democracy in these countries may align less with the traditional definition. Finally, future work should address limitations in our conjoint design (SM Section L). For example, we described democracy at a level of abstraction that allows comparison across the eight different conceptions of democracy. But having shown that free and fair elections are a significant component of how people conceptualize democracy, it would be worthwhile to consider what concrete features are understood to make an election be free and fair, and to what extent these perceptions can be manipulated.

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Contributions

All authors developed the project's conceptual and theoretical framework and designed the survey instrument; J.C. collected the data, with support from E.Y. and S.W.; E.Y. analyzed and visualized the data, with support from J.C. and S.W.; All authors discussed and interpreted the results, and wrote and revised the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests. The views expressed here are those of the authors.

Data and materials availability

All data and replication code are made available on Dryad, https://doi.org/10.5061/dryad.1zcrjdg1t.

Tables and Figures (Figure Raw Image Attached Separately)

Table 1. Understandings of democracy and their measurement in our survey.

Democratic Understanding	Measurement in Conjoint
Electoral	Elections for political leadership in this country are [freely and fairly contested by various political groups / biased in favor of the political group that currently holds power / not held or non-existent]
Liberal	Citizens' individual liberties, such as freedom of speech, religion, and assembly are [strongly/ weakly / not at all] protected by the law
Institutional	When making decisions, the country's leader [must respect / can sometimes bypass / can almost always bypass] the legislature and courts' authority
Populist	When making policies, politicians [frequently / sometimes / rarely] follow what the majority wants
Loyalist	When citizens dislike their government's policies [most obey / some obey and some challenge / most challenge] the government
Substantive (economy)	The economic situations of the rich and the poor are [generally equal / somewhat unequal / highly unequal]
Substantive (gender)	The rights of men and women are [equal / somewhat unequal / highly unequal]
Technocratic	Independent, non-elected experts have [a great deal of / some / not much] influence on policy
Direct	The people vote directly on policy decisions [frequently / sometimes / rarely]

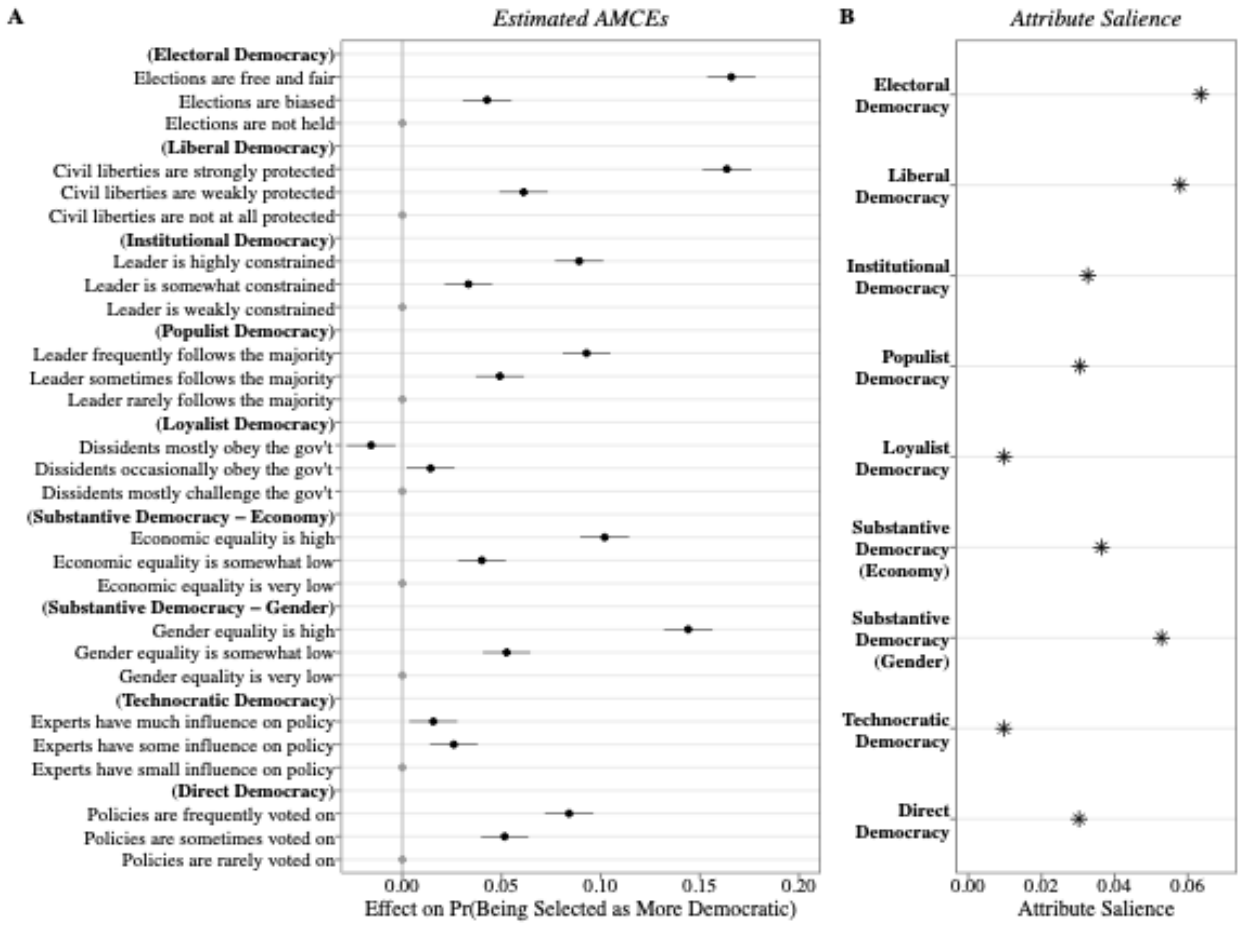

Figure 1. Factors influencing people's evaluation of democracy in the six-country sample. In Panel A, error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals, calculated based on standard errors clustered at the individual level. All estimates are statistically significant at the 0.05 level, upon adjustments for multiple comparisons using the Benjamini–Hochberg procedure (*56*). In Panel B, higher estimated salience indicates that the attribute matters more to respondents' evaluation of democracy (*42*).

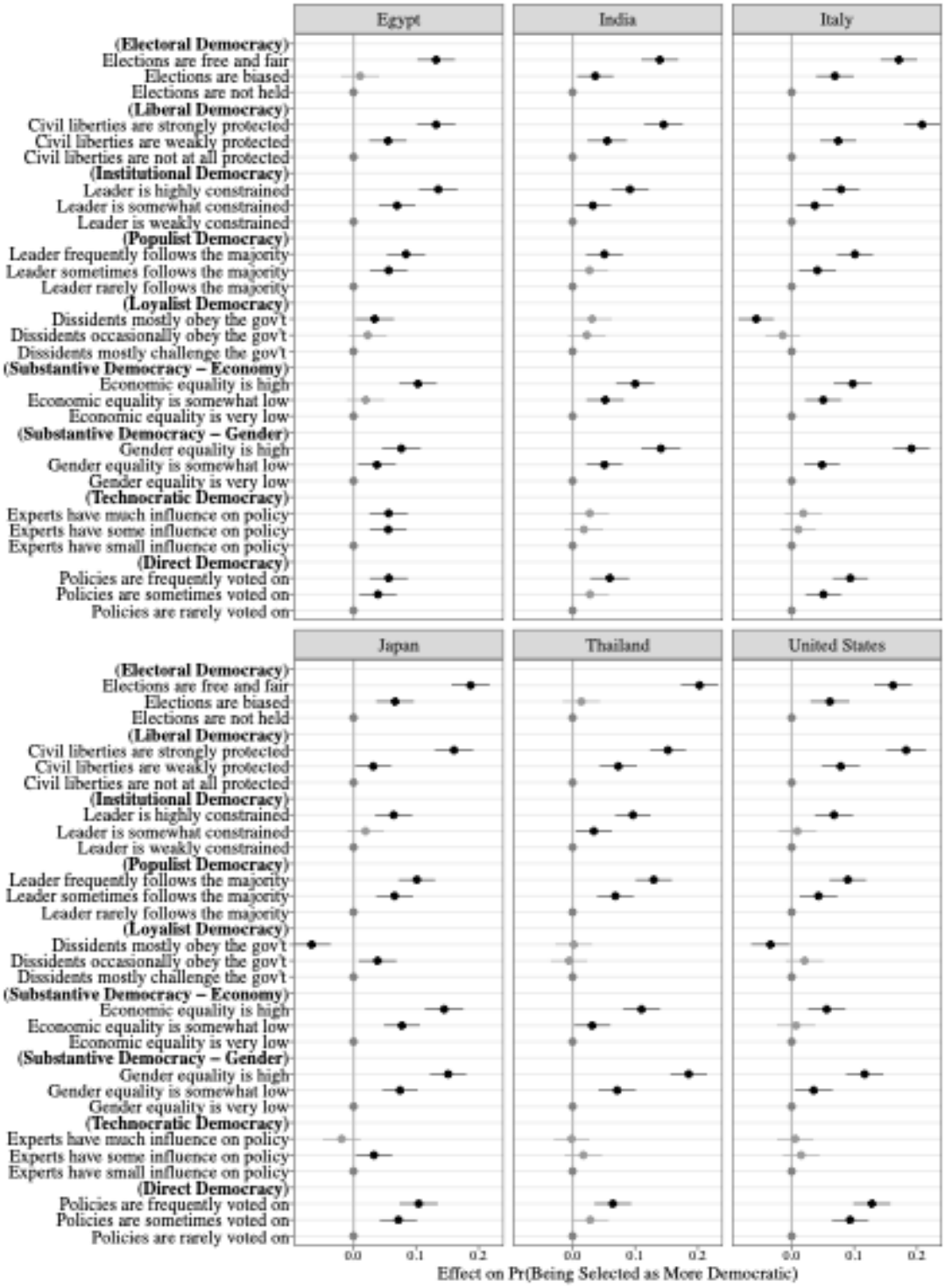

Figure 2. Factors influencing people's evaluation of democracy in each of six countries. Estimates represent average marginal component effects. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals, calculated based on standard errors clustered at the individual level. Statistically significant estimates at the 0.05 level, upon adjustments for multiple comparisons using the Benjamini–Hochberg procedure (*56*), are displayed in black.

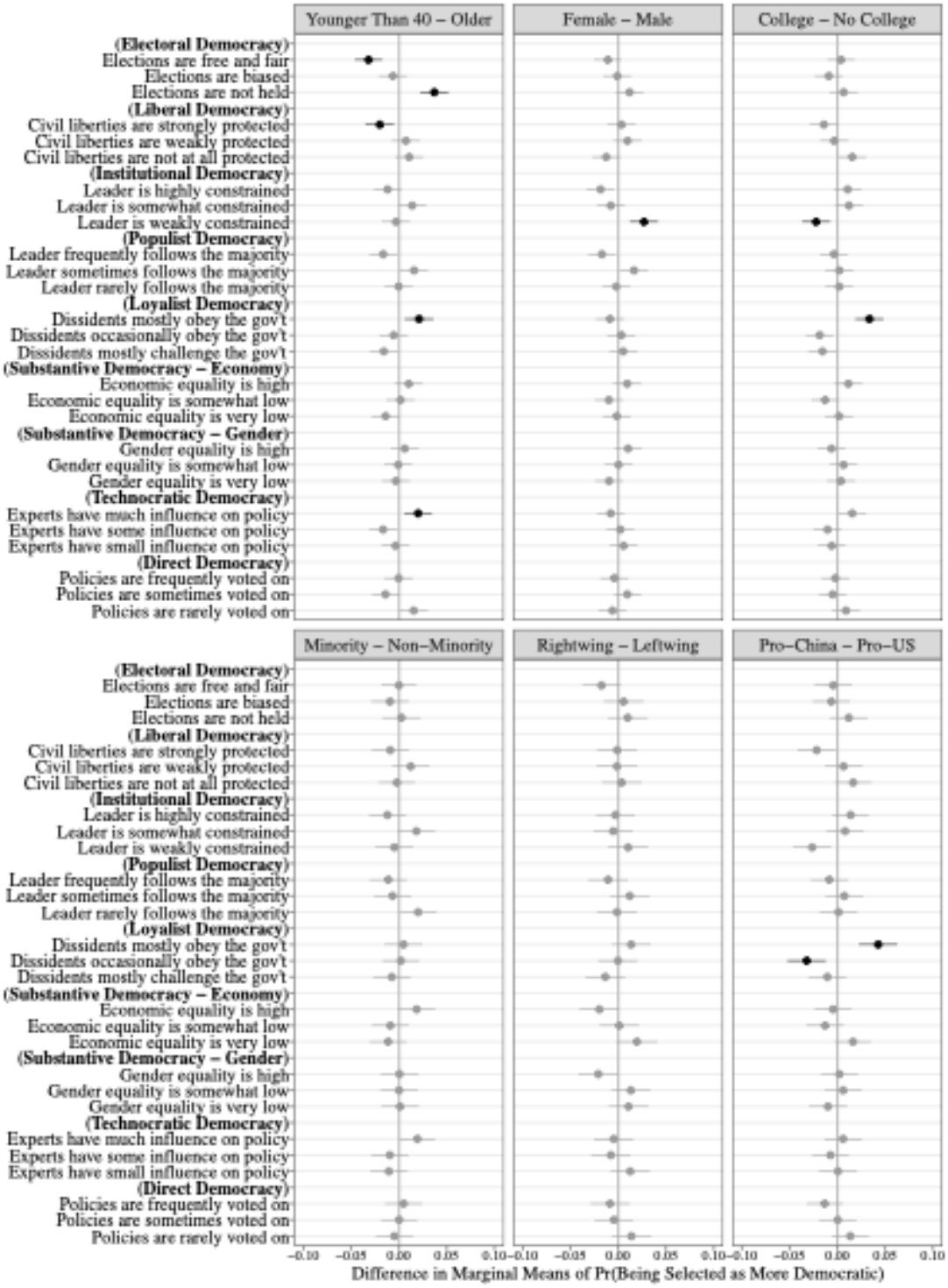

Figure 3. Difference in democratic evaluations across subgroups. Estimates represent differences in marginal means. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals, calculated based on standard errors clustered at the individual level. Statistically significant estimates at the 0.05 level, upon adjustments for multiple comparisons using the Benjamini– Hochberg procedure (*56*), are displayed in black.