

Defending Democracy: Investigating the Efficacy of Elite Democratic Defense in a Competitive Information Environment

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Abstract

When democracies are challenged by democratically elected incumbents, citizens are faced with two competing claims: incumbent justifications for the autocratic proposal versus democratic defenders' claims that they harm democracy. While citizen involvement in the defense of democracy is paramount, up until now it is unclear under which circumstances citizens give more credence to which claim. We argue citizens judge the trade-off between incumbent and democratic defender based on the ambiguity surrounding the autocratic action and the credibility of the defenders. A factorial survey experiment in the Netherlands, France, and Germany ($n = 9,159$) provides strong evidence for this argument. Citizen evaluations of autocratic actions depend largely on the action's ambiguity and the credibility of democratic defenders. Our findings provide avenues for democratic defenders, but also warn of pitfalls and potential backlash against democratic defense.

1 Introduction

Does democratic defense matter? Democracies are increasingly challenged from within by democratically elected governments, rather than by radical forces outside of the democratic system (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). This occurs in newer democracies such as Poland and Hungary, but also in older and arguably consolidated democracies such as India or the United States. This incumbent-led autocratization underscores the urgency of the question of whether and how democracies can be effectively defended against acts of autocratization. Recent theoretical work on how autocratization can be opposed highlights the importance of the dynamic interaction between opposition elites and citizens for the emergence and success of democratic defense. While there is some evidence that institutional resilience can prevent incumbents autocratizing (Boese, Lindberg, and Lührmann, 2021; Merkel and Lührmann, 2021), these very institutions and accountability mechanisms are often the target of incumbent-led autocratization in liberal democracies. Many cases of democratic recession – i.e., autocratization within democracies without full breakdown into autocracy (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019, pp. 1099-1100) – start in the *liberal* elements of democracy: restricting civil society, undermining an independent judiciary, or obstructing a free press (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Wunsch and Blanchard, 2023). As such, democratic resilience requires that pro-democracy actors engage in democratic defense, pursue resistance strategies to safeguard democracy, and counter acts of autocratization. An actor-based approach to democratic defense is

therefore crucial in the study of autocratization and the resistance against it.

Yet, we know little about how autocratization attempts can be successfully thwarted by such actors. Emerging scholarship has argued that democratic defense requires a plurality of actors to collectively resist democratic recession in defiance of the autocratizing incumbent (Tomini et al., 2023; van Lit et al., 2023), arguing that democratic defense relies on the interplay between contestation by institutional and societal elites as well as mass public mobilization to effectively resist autocratization (cf. Gamboa, 2022). Recent autocratization attempts in Israel in early 2023 (Gidron, 2023), Poland in 2017-18 (Matthes, 2021) and during the 2023 elections (Markowski, 2024), and Guatemala in 2023 (Schwartz and Isaacs, 2023) highlight that citizen mobilization can be a driving force in preventing autocratization, reverting back to democracy after autocratization, and driving democratization (cf. della Porta, 2014). However, for citizens to be willing to defend democracy, they need to recognize a threat to democracy when they see it. But there is increasing evidence that citizens are often unable to detect these threats, either because they engage in motivated reasoning to rationalize autocratic acts as being democratic (Krishnarajan, 2023), because they favor other policies more (Gidengil et al., 2022; Graham and Svolik, 2020), or because of partisan proclivities (Barber and Pope, 2019; Mazepus and Toshkov, 2022; Simonovits et al., 2022). This is well documented in recent experimental research, which force respondents to strike a balance between their partisan affiliation and democracy concerns.

Currently, we lack empirical evidence on whether and how opposition elites can trigger resistance against autocratization among citizens. This study therefore examines the conditions under which citizens update their perceptions of democracy in the face of democratic defense cues by elite democratic defenders, and how citizens adjudicate between

competing democratic claims by the autocratizing incumbent and pro-democracy resistance actors. Recent literature has started to investigate the efficacy of pro-democratic claims, but this has resulted in conflicting conclusions. Wuttke et al. (2024, 2024) find limited evidence of the effects of pro-democratic claims, while Hobolt and Osnabrügge (Hobolt and Osnabrügge, 2024) find that voters are willing to punish politicians who transgress against democracy. These conflicting findings, we argue, exist because incumbent justifications and democratic defense claims exist in a competitive information environment. The claims that a proposal is democratic or autocratic do not exist in a vacuum, but are shaped by the credibility of the democratic defender and the ambiguity of the autocratic action. We aim to advance our understanding of the efficacy of pro-democratic claims by investigating this competitive information environment in more depth.

We posit three central arguments to further this debate. First, we argue that elite democratic defense is instrumental in raising awareness about incumbent-led autocratization (Tomini et al., 2023). In particular, institutional elites inhabiting state institutions play a key role in articulating the antidemocratic nature of proposed autocratic actions. Second, we argue that the efficacy of elite democratic defense depends on the perceived credibility of the elite actor mounting this defense. This, in turn, depends on citizens' perceptions of the elite actors' self-interest (van Lit et al., 2023). We posit whereas 'selfless' democratic defense against autocratic proposals targeting a third democratic institution is perceived to be more credible, opposition against autocratic proposals targeting their own institutions tend to be perceived as less credible. Third, we argue that elite cues are especially important the more 'vexing ambiguous' (Bermeo, 2016, p. 15) autocratic actions are, as ambiguity obscures to citizens how the proposal might affect democracy.

Contemporary democratic erosion has been characterized by opaque, and often covert, executive aggrandizement, instead of unambiguous electoral manipulation or outright coups (Bermeo, 2016; Daly, 2019; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). These ‘stealth’ forms of autocratization (Varol, 2015, see also Luo and Przeworski, 2023) are hard to recognize for citizens, making elite cues all the more important.

In sum, our overarching argument is that that citizens must adjudicate between the two complex and competing claims of the elite democratic defender (and whether they are credible or not) and the autocratizing incumbent (and whether their justification for the autocratic proposal is ambiguous or not).

We test these claims with a pre-registered factorial survey experiment in three liberal democracies (France, Germany, and The Netherlands, $n = 9,159$). We present respondents with a fictitious news release about autocratization, manipulating the nature of the *autocratic action*, the *justification* provided by the incumbent, and a *democratic defense* by an elite democratic defender. These three elements are randomly varied to examine how they independently affect democracy evaluations of the proposed autocratic action. Since the effect of partisanship and group identity on acquiescence with autocratization is increasingly well established in the literature (Gidengil et al., 2022; Graham and Svolik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2023; Mazepus and Toshkov, 2022; Simonovits et al., 2022), we study how democratic defense can affect citizens’ perceptions of democracy *in the absence of identity cues*. The fictitious news release is, therefore, situated in a third country (Norway) to abstract citizens’ perceptions of democracy from partisan considerations.

The results of the experiment provide some optimism: democratic defense is possible. In many instances, pro-democratic elite cues signal to citizens that democracy is under threat. However, the results should also caution us: democratic defense is hard, as autoc-

ratizing incumbents seem to have the wind at their back, while elite democratic defenders fight an uphill battle. Specifically, we find when incumbents justify their autocratic action with an appeal to a positively valenced good (i.e., combating corruption), the action is consistently seen as more democratic – even if democratic defenders voice their concerns about democracy. In fact, we find some evidence that a democratic defense in these cases can actually backfire and make the action seem more democratic than if no defense had taken place.

This paper advances the literature on democratic resistance against autocratization on two fronts. First, we contribute to the emerging literature on preventing and reversing incumbent-led autocratization (Boese, Edgell, et al., 2021; Cleary and Öztürk, 2022; Gamboa, 2022; Tomini et al., 2023; van Lit et al., 2023). We show that resistance against autocratization is a complex interplay between the autocratizing incumbent, elite democratic defenders, and citizens. Specifically, we find avenues for successful elite democratic defense, but also pitfalls and risks that democratic defenders must avoid. Second, we contribute to the literature on citizen recognition of autocratic actions (Gessler and Kaftan, 2023; Graham and Svolik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2023; Mazepus and Toshkov, 2022). We show that – even in the absence of partisan cues – citizen evaluations of democracy are easily manipulated by autocratizing incumbents.

To build and test these arguments comprehensively, the paper is structured as follows. In the next part, we theorize how elite democratic defense can affect citizen evaluations of policy proposals made by an autocratizing incumbent. We formulate six hypotheses to provide an overarching argument of elite democratic defense, which incorporates perceptions of the ambiguous nature of the autocratic action as well as the credibility of the democratic defender. We then outline our empirical approach and our original survey

experiment, fielded in the Netherlands, France, and Germany ($n = 9.159$). In addition to the pre-registered test of our hypotheses, we explore the theorized causal mechanisms, and show that these in fact explain most of the variation in our sample. In the conclusion, we bring our hypotheses about the conditional effects of elite democratic defense and the causal effects of credibility and ambiguity together, and formulate avenues for future research.

2 Citizens as Judges of Democracy

Institutional, political and societal elites play an important role in resisting autocratization. While the empirical study of autocratization has focused for a long time on the preconditions of democratic recession (Waldner and Lust, 2018) and the strategies employed by authoritarian actors (Morgenbesser, 2020; Schedler, 2002), recent research has made inroads into the conditions under which democracies can be defended against the onset of autocratization (Boese, Edgell, et al., 2021; Tomini et al., 2023; van Lit et al., 2023). This literature on democratic defense highlights that elite democratic defenders do not (and cannot) stand alone: elites and citizen defense usually need to collaborate to counter autocratization.

On an aggregate level, citizen support for democracy is strongly related to the resilience of democracy (Claassen, 2020). However, on a more micro-level, we know that citizens have diverse (policy) preferences, of which a commitment to democracy is just one. In these strands of research, citizens are asked to weigh the trade-off between certain (policy) preferences on the one hand, and commitment to democracy on the other hand. Increasing evidence shows that democracy often takes the back seat in these trade-offs. Graham and Svobik (2020) and Carey et al. (2020) find that only a small minority of respondents were

willing to punish an in-party candidate when they showed disdain for democratic norms. This effect can be due to citizens' strong preference for their own power, but it can also be grounded in citizens taking cues from leader- or party-names in the news, without actually having to consider the policy itself (Bisgaard and Slothuus, 2018; Brader et al., 2012; Nicholson and Hansford, 2014). In a study on a diverse set of countries, Krishnarajan (2023) shows that citizens are not always conscious of the fact that they trade-off against democracy. Instead, citizens 'update' their democracy beliefs: they consider an action that harms democracy actually as democratic, because it aligns with their partisan or policy preference (and vice-versa). Similarly, Mazepus and Toshkov (2022) find that opposition-supporters are more in favor of extending checks and balances on executive power, while government-supporters are more lenient towards limiting them. When their in-party is in government, it is likely that a citizen wants the government to perform well and implement its preferred policies. By extension, any limitations on the achievement of these policies is viewed less favorably.

These studies suggest that citizens are highly susceptible to elite cues about democracy. When reading this with a pessimistic view towards the future of democracy, this implies that citizen commitment to democracy might be inconsistent, dependent on political gain, and full of bias. More optimistically, however, the fluidity of citizens' democracy conceptions also means that they should be susceptible to arguments of pro-democratic actors about the democratic quality of different actions.

Our overarching argument, therefore, is that elite pro-democratic counterclaims (i.e. 'democratic defenses' stating that a proposed autocratic action is, in fact, autocratic) can counter the trade-offs posited by autocratic incumbents. We build this argument by first assessing how the autocratizing incumbents' and democratic defenders' claims affect

citizen perceptions of democracy separately. But in reality, these claims and counterclaims exist in a competitive information environment (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Robison, 2022), so we subsequently theorize how citizen perception is affected when the autocratic claim and democratic counterclaim collide.

2.1 The Efficacy of Credible Democratic Defense

In the context of incumbent-led autocratization, the autocratizing incumbent has democratic mandate. This makes it easier for them to push through policies that might harm democracy, as citizens often have neither *a priori* reason to doubt an incumbent’s commitment to democracy, nor to question an action’s effect on democracy. Much of the scholarship assess only the effects of the autocratizing incumbent’s claims (cf. Gessler and Kaftan, 2023). Recent scholarship has begun examining counterclaims, but thus far, there is no conclusive evidence that these counterclaims are persuasive as the incumbents’ claims (Hobolt and Osnabrügge, 2024; Wuttke and Foos, 2024; Wuttke et al., 2024). In line with this, we argue that whether citizens perceive a proposal to be autocratic or democratic depends on the presence or absence of a claim about the proposal’s democratic nature. When citizens are confronted with a clear signal that an autocratic action is, in fact, autocratic, they likely reconsider their evaluation of the action as less democratic. Specifically, a democratic defense – the claim that a proposal is *undemocratic* – pinpoints an incumbent’s (potential) lack of democratic commitment, underlines that there is harm to democracy, and by extension decreases the perceived democratic quality of the policy. therefore, we expect:

Democratic defense hypothesis H1: When a democratic defense is mounted, the

autocratic action will be perceived as less democratic than when no democratic defense is mounted.

However, not all democratic defenders are equally credible. We argue that a democratic defense only works as a counterweight to autocratic proposals when they are sufficiently credible. Opposition actors may claim a proposal has adverse effects on democracy for a variety of reasons (Tomini et al., 2023). This also indicates a defense of democracy might occur for disingenuous reasons. Opposition actors might use it as a political ploy, rather than genuinely standing up for democracy. So while democratic defenders can stand up to defend democracy for a variety of reasons, we argue that their motivation can influence their credibility in the eyes of citizens. Wuttke et al. (2024) find some first evidence for this, concluding that pro-democracy speeches by Republicans after January 6th do not affect citizens' mind about the insurrection. Moreover, previous research has established that a lack of credibility may lead citizens to discount party rhetoric (Bawn and Somer-Topcu, 2012; Enelow and Munger, 1993; Fernandez-Vazquez, 2019; Lupu, 2013), which in turn can influence citizens' behavior and preference formation. An actor's credibility may result from competence considerations, but trust in actor's true motives is another source of credibility (Druckman, 2001).

As such, opposition actors who have a certain degree of self-interest in preventing the action might be perceived as less credible by citizens. The claim that a proposal is bad for democracy might not align with citizens' views of the defender if they are perceived to just try to save their own skin. On the contrary when an actor has no 'skin in the game' they can be perceived to be more credible in their concern for democracy. Therefore, we hypothesize that a claim about adverse effects for democracy is more credible when it is

made by an actor who is less self-interested. Therefor, we expect:

Credibility hypothesis H2: When democratic defenders have more self-interest in resisting the autocratic action, the effect of their defense will be less pronounced than when they are less self-interested.¹

2.2 The ‘Vexing Ambiguity’ of Autocratization

Where the credibility affects the strength of the democratic defense, ambiguity affects the strength of the incumbent. In recent years, we have seen ample examples in which autocratizing incumbents claim to be not *anti-democratic*, but rather *differently-democratic*: Hungary’s prime-minister Viktor Orbán’s ‘illiberal democrat’ is a paradigmatic example. In addition, autocratic policy proposals are often not clearly, overtly, and unambiguously autocratic (Daly, 2019; Ding and Slater, 2021). Some limits to democratic rule might actually be considered legitimate: curbing freedom of association to benefit public health during a pandemic, curbing freedom of the media for national security, or packing the courts the re-establish some previous balance (Daly, 2022). Research shows that considerations such as public health crises (Engler et al., 2021; Kolvani et al., 2021) and national security concerns (Lührmann and Rooney, 2021) can indeed trump commitment to democracy, both for citizens and elites. Some actions might also have diverging effects on democracy: harming one element of democracy, while safeguarding another. Requiring voter identification disenfranchises some voter groups disproportionately, while it also reduces voter fraud. Clearly, some actions might be democratic in some contexts, while they have an autocratic effect in others. Incumbents can therefore pick and choose justi-

¹We deviate from the preregistration by changing the order and numbering of our hypotheses. The content of the hypotheses is not changed. See the Online Appendix.

fications (or organizational structures) that seem legal and reasonable on their own. But they ‘interact in a horrible way when stitched together,’ potentially resulting in autocratization nonetheless (Scheppelle, 2013, see also Skaaning, 2020; Tomini, 2021). All in all, these dynamics can create a ‘vexing ambiguity’ (Bermeo, 2016, p. 15) around autocratization, in which it is unclear and contested what constitutes autocratization, who is the autocrat, and when autocratization starts.

Incumbent justifications for their actions, in turn, can emphasize and compound this ambiguity, as elites can strongly shape public perception and increase public approval of them (Grose et al., 2015; Levendusky and Horowitz, 2012; McGraw, 1991; Robison, 2022). In the context of autocratization, when a justification for an autocratic proposal is an appeal to a ‘positively valenced’ goal, ambiguity around its (autocratic) nature is introduced. For example, the battle against corruption is in itself a democratic goal, so it is *a priori* not clear why a proposal that is justified with such an appeal might be undemocratic. Therefore we expect:

Increased ambiguity hypothesis *H3a*: When an incumbent justifies an autocratic action with an appeal to a positively valenced goal, the action will be perceived as more democratic than when no justification is provided.

However, not all justifications are likely to have this effect. When autocratizing incumbents provide a justification that is clearly self-serving (i.e., when they admit that they aim to aggrandize their power), autocratization becomes less ambiguous and more clearly anti-democratic. As such, a justification that is self-serving, it is likely less persuasive to citizens than when no justification is provided. Therefore, we expect:

Decreased ambiguity hypothesis *H3b*: When an incumbent justifies an autocratic action with an appeal to increasing power, the action will be perceived as less democratic than when no justification is provided.

2.3 When Credibility and Ambiguity Collide

In the previous sections, we theorized about the effects of autocratizing incumbents' justifications and democratic defense claims in a one-sided information environment. However in real life, citizens are exposed to both claims more-or-less simultaneously, resulting in a competitive information environment (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Robison, 2022). Citizens must adjudicate between both claims to come to a conclusion about a proposal's 'democratic quality'. In this competitive information environment, the efficacy of one claim in changing citizens' minds depends on the efficacy of the other claim.

We argue that there are two main factors that are taken into account when citizens adjudicate between competing claims about the democratic quality of a specific proposal:

First, we argue the incumbent's justification interacts with the democratic defense. A democratic defense can be more effective, when the justification provided by the autocratizing incumbent is self-serving rather than an appeal to a positively valenced good. When the autocratizing incumbent openly admits they make a proposal to gain more power, and when democratic defenders claim the proposal harms democracy, citizens increasingly follow the democratic defenders. In turn, when the justification appeals to a positively valenced good, the ambiguity depresses the effect a democratic defense might have in comparison. In other words: if the autocratizing incumbent justifies their proposal with a self-serving justification (making autocratization less ambiguous and more

blatant), democratic defenders should be able to leverage this, and their claim should hold more weight for citizens than when the incumbent presents a positively valenced justification. Therefore, we expect:

Leverage hypothesis $H4$: When the justification by the incumbent is self-serving, the effect of a democratic defense will be more pronounced than when the incumbent's justification appeals to a positively valenced goal.

Second, however, democratic defenders can likely only leverage this when they are seen as credible. Specifically, when democratic defenders are perceived to be more self-interested in preventing the action, their defense is perceived to be less credible (following the logic for $H2$ above), and the proposal is considered comparatively more democratic. A democratic defender's ability to leverage a self-serving justification and their credibility interact: a more credible democratic defender will persuade even more citizens that an action is harmful to democracy when there is no justification, or when the justification is self-serving. Therefore, we expect:

Three-way interaction hypothesis $H5$: Citizens will see an action as least democratic when there is democratic defense, which is mounted by a selfless defender, and when there is no or a self-serving justification for it by the incumbent.

3 Data and Empirical Approach

To test our hypotheses, we fielded a factorial survey experiment in The Netherlands, France, and Germany in July and August 2023.² The survey was in the field from July 14 to July 31 in Germany and the Netherlands and from July 14 to August 3 in France. The survey was administered to a sample of 9,672 respondents by the company *Kieskompas*. *Kieskompas* recruits respondents through a Voting Advice Application (VAA). The panel is based on an opt-in basis, comprising VAA users who express a willingness to be contacted again. Although non-probability samples may result in biased outcomes, research indicates that the effects observed in survey experiments conducted with convenience samples versus population samples do not exhibit significant disparities (Krupnikov et al., 2021). To address selection bias, we apply post-stratification weights to approximate a nationally representative sample (Franco et al., 2017; Miratrix et al., 2018, see). The weighted sample includes 9,159 respondents.³

We field the survey in comparatively stable, well-performing, and arguably consolidated democracies (Germany, France, and the Netherlands) to study democratic defense in cases where democracy still appears to be ‘the only game in town’ (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Recent scholarship has exemplified that autocratization can occur at all levels of democracy: we saw it before in Poland and Hungary, and now in the United States

²The experiment was preregistered prior to data collection, on July 10, 2023, at [blinded for review, an anonymized version is attached]. The study has been approved by the Ethics Assessment Committee at [blinded for review]. Since we manipulate respondents’ perception of the Norwegian political system (see ‘Experimental Design’ below), we extensively debrief them and provide information at the end of the survey about the high quality of Norwegian democracy.

³See the Online Appendix for the weighting procedure. We run robustness checks to confirm that our substantive conclusions hold for the unweighted sample as well.

(Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018) and Greece (Pappas, 2020; V-Dem, 2023). Therefore our population of interest is liberal democracies, and not democracies where it is clear that democratic recession has occurred. At the same time, the quality of democracy is a topic of public debate in all three countries, making respondents from those countries likely somewhat familiar with (claims about) autocratization.

The selected cases also differ on important characteristics, which broadens the scope of our generalizability. Germans have, on average, a high satisfaction with, and support for democracy, which has been relatively stable over time since 1990. On average. French citizens score lower than the European median for both support and satisfaction, and Dutch citizens used to score high on both as well, but have seen a marked decline since the 2000s to a level somewhere between Germany and France (Claassen, 2020). Similarly, when it comes to trust in government, the three countries show divergent trajectories: Germany experienced slowly increasing trust in government since the 2000s (58.8 % of respondents expressed trust in government in 2022), while France remained a low-trust society (43.4 % of respondents expressed trust in government in 2021), and the Netherlands saw a decreasing trust from a high of 78.1 % in 2021 to 47.2 % in 2022 (OECD, 2021). All three countries have scored consistently high on V-Dem’s electoral democracy index (>0.85 since 1975) and liberal democracy index (>0.8 since 1982).

As such, the three cases provide divergent contexts within our population of liberal democracies for citizens’ views on democracy and susceptibility to opposing claims.

3.1 Experimental Design

We implement a $2 \times 2 \times 3$ factorial survey experiment, assigning respondents randomly to one of 12 vignettes showing a news release about democracy in Norway: 2 treatments

Experimental block

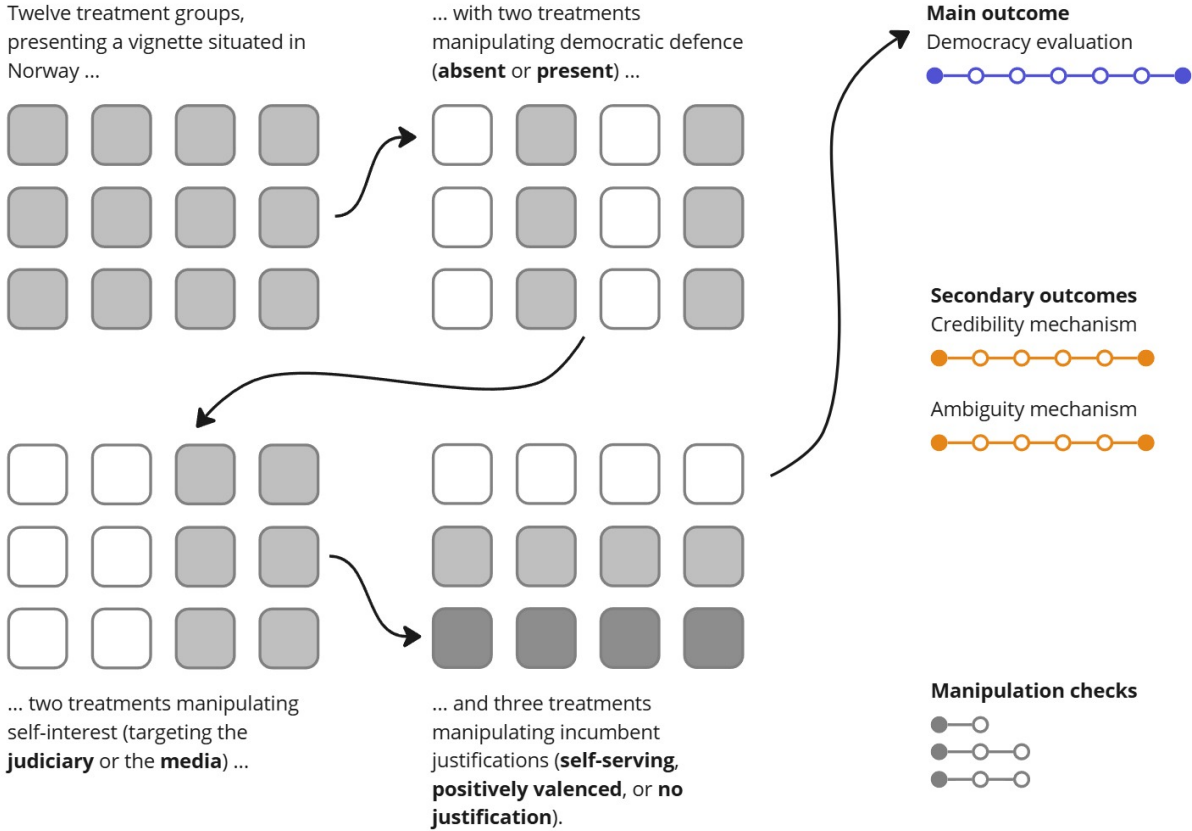


Figure 1: The experimental block in the survey. Each of the twelve treatment groups has approximately 750 respondents. See for a precise overview the Online Appendix. Please note we ask additional questions pre- and post-treatment. See for a full overview the Online Preregistration.

manipulating the absence or presence of a democratic defense; 2 treatments manipulating the democratic defenders' self-interest; and 3 treatments manipulating the autocratizing incumbent's justification (see Section 'Treatments' and Figures 2 and 1 below).

We situate the proposal in Norway, firstly, because this allows us to eliminate partisan responses. Previous research shows that a partisan or incumbency-cue has strong effects on respondents evaluation of an action's democratic quality (Graham and Svulik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2023). We are, on the other hand, interested in the effect of democratic defense in the absence of partisan cues. As discussed, in empirical reality an autocratic

proposal or a democratic defense is brought by an actor who often has partisan connotations. However, by including such partisan cues, it becomes impossible to disentangle the partisan effect from other theoretically interesting aspects. To be able to establish whether democratic defense – in and of itself – has an effect on citizen evaluations (and not like or dislike of the autocratizing incumbent or the democratic defender), it is necessary to abstract it away from partisan cues. Secondly, the Norwegian case is a strict yet not unreasonable test for democratic defenders. Norway presents a least likely case of democratic recession. When asked (pre-treatment), respondents evaluate Norwegian democracy at 6.23 (SD = 0.97, on a scale of 1 to 7). This means that respondents recognize Norway as (very) democratic and indicates that any autocratic action should be recognized as autocratic. However, challenges to democracy are also not entirely unlikely in Norway.⁴ Thirdly, presenting the case of Norway to respondents in other liberal democracies strengthens our connection to the population of interest. If we would have shown respondents a similar scenario in well-known and broadly-published case such as Hungary, we risk probing respondents' knowledge and evaluation of what they read about the case before, rather than the effects of our treatments.

The news release informs respondents about new legislation with an autocratic character proposed by the Norwegian prime minister (see Figure 2 for the full text and the design of the vignette). In the news release, we manipulate three dimensions: the presence/absence of democratic defense, the credibility of the democratic defender, and the ambiguity of the autocratic action. The news release moreover emphasizes that this a *proposal*, not passed legislation, and that parliament will consider the proposal in the next session, to increase both its ecological validity and underline that the democratic rules

⁴See this corruption scandal in the Norwegian Supreme Court: [Avondbladet, 2018](#); [Transparency International, 2022](#).

of the game appear to be followed. We now discuss all three experimental conditions in detail.

3.1.1 Treatments

To test the democratic defense hypothesis ($H1$), the absence or presence of elite democratic defense is manipulated with two conditions. The baseline treatment is the absence of any democratic defense (no statement by the Supreme Court). Its presence is manipulated by the statement that *Norway's Supreme Court, however, has issued a strongly negative opinion, opposing the proposal*. Extant research indicates that judges are a most likely case of democratic defenders, as independent and active judiciaries are paramount in preventing autocratization (Boese, Edgell, et al., 2021; Gibler and Randazzo, 2011; Zambrano et al., 2024). Courts have strong persuasive powers, especially in liberal democracies, to signal threats to democracy.⁵

To test the credibility hypothesis ($H2$) we vary the democratic defenders' credibility by manipulating elite democratic defender's self-interest in preventing the autocratic action. We do so by manipulating the target of the autocratic action. In the baseline, 'selfless' treatment, the incumbent's proposal limits media independence by proposing to create a new organization that has the power to *withdraw the license of public broadcasters*. In other words: the Supreme Court is defending another organization. The 'self-interest' treatment, in turn, is an autocratic action that affects judicial independence by proposing an organization that has the power to *dismiss Supreme Court judges*. Our reasoning is here that if the autocratic action targets Supreme Court judges, these judges also have a

⁵We corroborate this logic by asking respondents (pre-treatment) to evaluate how much they trust courts in their own country. Respondents trust courts the most (mean = 4.70, SD = 1.61), followed by the media (mean = 3.69, SD = 1.59).

Norwegian prime minister proposes new legislation

yesterday



OSLO, Norway — The prime minister of Norway proposed to create a new organisation that has the power to dismiss Supreme Court judges. The prime minister will appoint the members for this new organisation. The proposal is supported by the prime minister's governing party with the argument that this new organisation will combat rising corruption in the judiciary. Norway's Supreme Court has issued a strongly negative opinion, opposing the proposal. The parliament has announced it will discuss the prime minister's proposal in its next session.

Figure 2: Example vignette of treatment group 1. The treatments are underlined for clarity here, but had plain formatting in the actual survey. See the Section ‘Treatments’ for the *verbatim* formulation of the other treatments.

self-interest in issuing a negative opinion about it, while if the action targets the media, judges do not have a direct self-interest in preventing this. Self-interest, in this sense, is materialistic self-interest: judges have a material incentive to safeguard their own jobs and own independence. Selfless democratic defense, on the other hand, is this lack of material self-interest: judges who defend against media independence.

To test both ambiguity hypotheses ($H3a$ and $H3b$), we vary the ambiguity of the autocratic action by manipulating the justification by the incumbent. Here, the baseline treatment is the absence of any justification: similar to the absence of a democratic defense, we show respondents no additional information. We manipulate the ‘positive valence justification’ by an accompanying statement of the incumbent that the proposal needs to be implemented *with the argument that this new organization will combat rising corruption in the [media/judiciary]*. In turn, the ‘self-serving justification’ is manipulated

with a statement that the proposal needs to be implemented, *with the argument that this new organization will increase the government's control over the [media/judiciary]*.

The leverage hypothesis (H_4) and the three-way interaction hypothesis (H_5) are tested with an interaction between the treatments.

3.1.2 Experimental realism

All elements in the vignette are based on empirical examples of incumbent-led democratic recession to ensure ecological validity and experimental realism. First of all, the autocratic proposal in the vignette is not presented as a 'done deal', but will still be discussed in parliament. This is included to show respondents that the incumbent is adhering to procedural democratic norms, and is not outright and overtly autocratizing. Second, the proposal is about 'new organization', not about changes to an already existing organization. As such, we don't require respondents to know about the pre-existing characteristics of democratic institutions in Norway. In addition, by stating that 'the prime minister will appoint members for this new organization', we show respondents that the new organization will be completely under control of the incumbent to further emphasize its potential for executive aggrandizement. Furthermore, media-licenses have been threatened by incumbents in among others Venezuela (García-Guadilla and Mallen, 2019; Kaufman and Haggard, 2019), Belarus (Trantidis, 2022), and Hungary (Bánkuti et al., 2012; Herman, 2016). Disciplinary chambers against judges have come in the spotlight predominantly because of the Polish case (Sadurski, 2019). But similar control over the judiciary in the context of autocratization has been observed in among others Ecuador (Freeman, 2020), the Maldives (Musthaq, 2014), and again Hungary (Bakke and Sitter, 2022). Autocratization has been legitimized with reference to anti-corruption measures globally, from Hungary, to Suriname, to Indonesia, but it is also a genuine political goal

of democratic incumbents. The formulation of the democratic defense-treatment is taken from the Polish National Judicial Council when confronted with the possible establishment of a disciplinary chamber.⁶ The vignette is formatted as a news-release to further enhance its realism (see Figure 2 for an example).

Despite our efforts to make the vignette externally valid, we recognize this experiment is an abstraction of empirical reality. We designed the vignette with a focus mostly on internal validity (i.e. treatment validity, Egami and Hartman, 2023). As such, we take out treatments from empirical examples, designed as a news release. Because our main focus is on assessing the effects of causes – specifically the effects of democratic defenses in the context of competing claims – we sacrifice some external, contextual validity. We combat this by fielding the experiment in a variety of contexts (the Netherlands, France, and Germany), and assess the effects of our treatments in these sub samples separately in the Online Appendix. We reflect on how our results travel to other contexts in the Conclusion

3.2 Outcome Variables and Hypotheses Testing

After receiving the experimental treatments, respondents are routed to a series of questions that tap into their evaluations of the democratic quality of the proposal. The main outcome of interest is their answer to the question *To what extent do you think this action would make Norway more or less democratic?*, answered on a 7-point Likert scale, where higher scores indicate respondents find it *more* democratic. In addition, we ask two questions to tap into the causal mechanisms underlying our experimental findings (see below).

⁶KRS, 2017, Opinion of the National Council of the Judiciary on the Government Draft Act on the National Council of the Judiciary and Certain Other Acts, <https://www.krs.pl/en/resolutions-positions-of-the-council.html>.

The experiment concludes with three manipulation checks. Respondents who fail the manipulation checks are included in the analysis per our preregistration: robustness checks shows that our conclusions hold when controlling for attention and manipulation (see the Online Appendix). The estimation of the models is explicated in the Online Appendix. We run balance checks on all covariates included in the survey and only include those that were unbalanced.⁷ We analyze several heterogeneous treatment effects (for country, political ideology, and party-affiliation) and find that our results hold across subgroups. Even though these contexts appear to be important to some degree (and warrant further research), these results strengthen the external validity of our argument, as we show that the overarching argument presented in this paper travels between different liberal democracies. To ease interpretation, the results of our models are presented graphically: higher scores consistently indicate that respondents evaluate the proposal in the vignette as *more* democratic (and consequently that democratic defense, if present, has mattered less). All full regression tables can be found in the Online Appendix).

3.3 Mechanism Testing

We argue the effects of incumbent justifications for autocratic proposals and democratic defense claims occur because citizens perceive them as ambiguous or credible. To assess these mechanisms, we ask respondents two post-treatment questions:

⁷The measured variables are: political trust, satisfaction with democracy, support for democracy (in general), support for liberal democracy, trust in political institutions, sex, education, birth year, vote at the previous elections, income, employment, and region. See the Online Preregistration for the exact questions. Only the variable measuring commitment to free and fair elections (`post.libdem.frelect`) was unbalanced and therefore included. For parsimony, it is not shown in the visualizations, but it is included in the regression models.

To examine the credibility-mechanism empirically, we ask those respondents who saw a democratic defense about the democratic defender’s perceived intention, with the question: *thinking about the Norwegian Supreme Court: if you had to choose, what is the most likely motivation of the Supreme Court behind their opinion on the new organization?* The answer options ranged from 1: *Genuinely believes the new organization harms democracy* to 6: *[selfishly] thinks [judges/journalists] might lose their job*.⁸ We recoded respondents’ answers so that higher scores indicate that the democratic defense is perceived to be more motivated by commitment to democracy (i.e. more credible).

To examine the ambiguity-mechanism empirically, we ask all respondents *what do you personally think is more important in a democratic country?* The answer options ranged from 1: *fighting corruption / that the government is in control* to 6: *that judges cannot be easily dismissed / that media licenses cannot easily be withdrawn* - depending on what the vignette read. This question captures the ambiguity around the proposal as it asks respondents to trade-off democratic ideals (judicial independence and media independence) for some other policy-goal (fighting corruption or executive aggrandizement). Since the fight against corruption can be considered a democratic goal in itself (similar to judicial or media independence), the choice between corruption and judicial or media independence is not so clear-cut. As such, if this justification indeed introduces ambiguity, respondents might be tempted to shift their answer to the justification-side of the scale rather than the judicial or media independence-side of the scale. In contrast, a self-serving justification clearly runs opposite to democratic ideals, making the choice for respondents more clear-

⁸For answer-option 6, ‘selfishly’ was shown when the autocratic action in the vignette targets the judiciary, to contrast their commitment to democracy with selfish job-security. Due to a coding-error in the survey-flow, the credibility-question was only shown to Dutch respondents who saw a democratic defense, n = 1544.

cut. Since this justification is not expected to introduce ambiguity, we expect respondents to answer more towards the judicial or media independence-side of the scale. We recoded respondents' answer so that higher scores indicate respondents are more likely to follow the autocratizing incumbent's justification (i.e. more ambiguity).

We analyze both mechanisms with a mediation analysis employing weighted Structural Equation Models. In the Online Appendix we show that our conclusions hold when we run standard OLS regression with the mediators (credibility and ambiguity) as the outcomes of our experimental treatments.

4 Results: Does Democratic Defense Matter?

Can judicial elites convince citizens that a proposed action is undemocratic and autocratic? Do citizens react differently when the judicial elites have a self-interest in preventing the action? And does the justification provided by the autocratizing incumbent change citizens' democracy perceptions? Our findings show that while democratic defense matters, its efficacy depends on the competitiveness of the informational environment: the democratic defenders' credibility and on the action's ambiguity (increased or decreased through the incumbent's justification).

Before we turn to our main findings, we make two important preliminary observations. First, we note that the intercept of our models is rather low: [1.59 - 1.80] across models. The intercept captures respondents' mean evaluation of the proposal when there is no incumbent justification and no democratic defense. And since we find no difference between the proposal against media independence and judicial independence (see below), this is cause for some (very) careful optimism. It namely suggests that – in the absence of partisan cues — respondents are clearly able to evaluate autocratic actions as autocratic.

Considering that our autocratic action-treatments do not directly target the most obvious violations of democracy, such as free and fair elections, it is a good omen that a large majority of Dutch, French, German respondents recognize that limiting media freedom or judicial independence harms democracy. A methodological caveat here is that there is a floor-effect for our coefficients. Since the proposals are already deemed rather autocratic without taking into account the hypothesized effects of elite democratic defense or incumbents' justifications, the substantive effects found are rather small.

Second, we find no statistically significant difference in respondents' evaluations of proposals that limit judicial independence and proposals that limit media independence ($\beta = 0.04, p < 0.109$, see the top row in Figure 3). Methodologically, this indicates that these two treatments are equivalent in affecting respondents' outcome answers. Substantively, this suggests the interaction effects between the autocratic action and judicial democratic defense are not driven by differences in the action, but instead tap into the self-interest dimension as we designed them to do.

4.1 The Conditional Effect of Democratic Defense

First, we examine democratic defense impacts how democratic a proposal is evaluated. We hypothesized that elite democratic defense gives respondents informational cues that the incumbent's proposal is in fact autocratic (*H1*). The second row in Figure 3 (*democratic defense: present*, across all three models) shows that this is the case (see the Online Appendix for the full regression results). On average, when a democratic defense is present, the incumbent's proposal is seen as less democratic than when democratic defense is absent, confirming hypothesis *H1* ($\beta = -0.10, p < 0.001$).

However, the success of democratic defense cannot be seen separately from the demo-

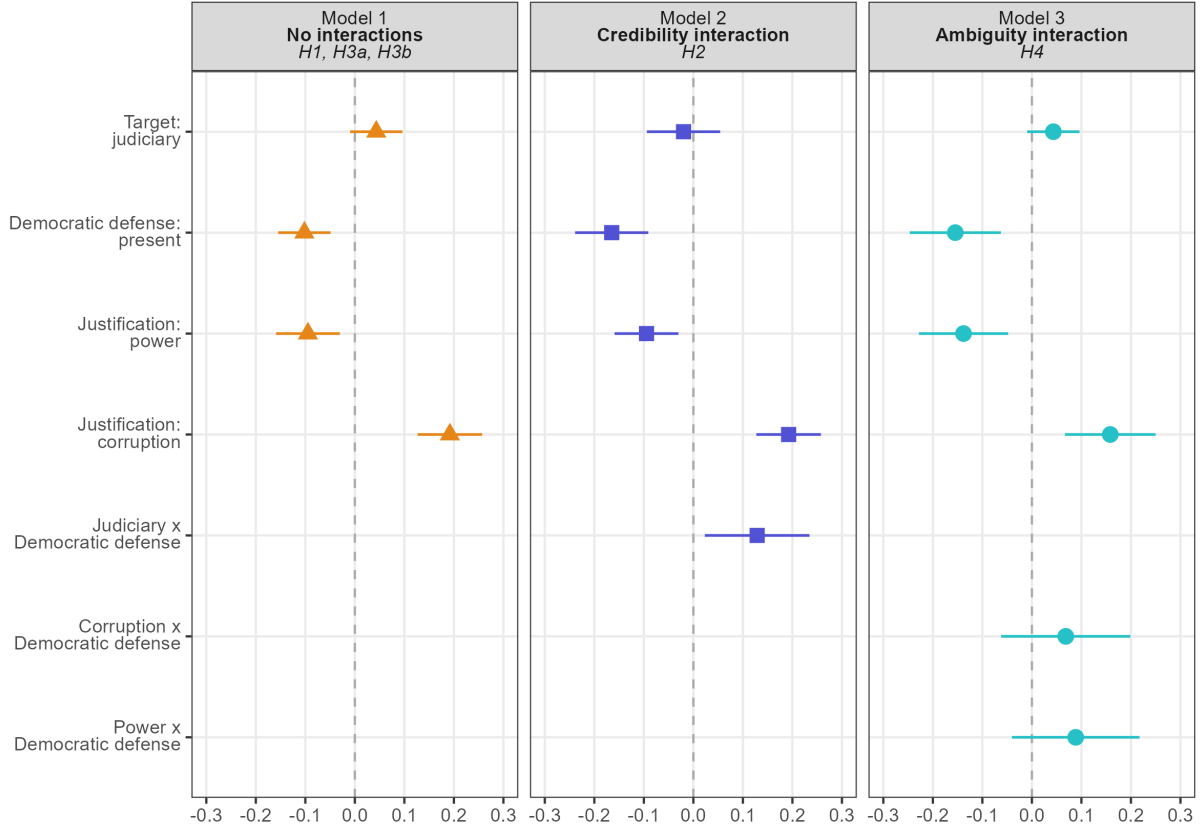


Figure 3: Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals from OLS regression (see the Online Appendix for the full table). Higher scores mean that respondents evaluate the proposals in the vignette as *more* democratic (and consequently that democratic defense, if present, has mattered less).

cratic defender. We argued when the democratic defender can be perceived as materially self-interested, their defense is seen as not genuine and, therefore, less credible ($H2$). Model 2, fifth row, in Figure 3 shows the result of the interaction effect (*judiciary* $\times$ *democratic defense*). It shows clear empirical support for this hypothesis. A proposal is seen as *more* democratic when Supreme Court judges defend judicial independence of the Supreme Court than when judges defend the public broadcaster’s media independence. In other words, when elites have a material self-interest in their democratic defense respondents’ evaluate the proposal to be more democratic than when elites defend another organization. We thus find evidence for this interaction effect, supporting hypothesis $H2$

$(\beta = 0.13, p = 0.017)$.

There are two implications that can be drawn from this. First, it implies that democratic defense cannot be seen separate from the autocratic action and the democratic defender. While this seems obvious given that a defense is always in response to an attack, this also provides complex problems for defenders. It implies that the political context matters and that democratic defense is more than a ‘simple’ call on democratic preferences or democratic commitment. Second, however, when judges speak out against a proposal challenging judicial independence, the proposal is seen as *more* democratic than when judges do not defend democracy. So not only does democratic defense work better when it is selfless rather than self-interested, this experiment provides evidence that a defense by a self-interested democratic defender can *backlash*. The proposal is seen as more legitimate and democratic when a self-interested actor issues a ‘strongly negative opinion’ about it. This could indicate that citizens perceive a democratic defense by a self-interested actor as a clear sign that there is something amiss with that defender and that they should be stopped or contained. In other words: a self-interested defense might be evidence to citizens that the autocratizing incumbent is actually doing the right thing.

4.2 The Effects of Incumbent Justifications

Turning to the claims of the autocratizing incumbent, we expected that their justifications affect respondents’ evaluations. We hypothesized that incumbents’ justifications obfuscate the undemocratic nature of autocratic actions and make their autocratic consequences more ambiguous by appealing to positive outcomes, such as combating corruption (*H3a*). The fourth row in Figure 3 (*justification: corruption*, across all models) shows indeed that respondents evaluate an autocratic action that is justified with an appeal to a positively

valenced justification as more democratic than when no justification is presented ($\beta = 0.19, p < 0.001$, supporting hypothesis $H3a$).

We also argued that an incumbent’s justifications might reveal ‘autocratic intent’ to citizens. Hypothesis $H3b$ stated that when the autocratizing incumbent makes clear that they aim to expand their own powers, this has negative effects on respondents’ evaluations. We find support for hypothesis $H3b$ in Figure 3, across all models, third row: when autocratizing incumbents appeal to executive aggrandizement with a self-serving justification, citizens perceive the proposal to make Norway less democratic, compared to when no justification is presented ($\beta = -0.09, p = 0.004$).

The leverage hypothesis $H4$ posited that that democratic defenders should in some cases be able to leverage an incumbent justification. We expected democratic defense would be less effective if a positively valenced justification is present compared to no justification; and more effective if a self-serving justification is present compared to no justification. We find no evidence for this in Figure 3, Model 3, sixth row (*corruption* $\times$ *democratic defense*, $\beta = 0.07, p = 0.304$); or in Model 3, the bottom row (*power* $\times$ *democratic defense*, $\beta = 0.09, p = 0.178$). Hence, democratic defenders do not seem to be able leverage an incumbent’s justification to make the autocratic nature of the proposal even clearer. That said, a more nuanced picture emerges when we estimate the three-way interactions between democratic defense, incumbent justification, and the target of autocratic action.

4.3 The Effects in the Competitive Information Environment

In the three-way hypothesis $H5$, we postulated that the effect of democratic defense depends both on the perceived self-interest of the democratic defender, as well as the justi-

fication provided by the autocratizing incumbent in a three-way interaction. Specifically, we hypothesized that democratic defense is most effective when the defender is selfless and when no justification or a self-serving justification was provided, compared to all other combinations of democratic defence and incumbent justifications. As we show below, we find no clear-cut evidence for this. At the same time, Figure 4 shows that democratic defense and incumbent justifications do interact in interesting and complex ways.

To facilitate interpretation we class the treatments into three sub-groups: when there is no democratic defense, a self-interested democratic defense (i.e. the judiciary defending against a proposal to limit judicial independence), and a selfless democratic defense (i.e. the judiciary defending against a proposal to limit media independence).⁹

First, in the *absence* of democratic defense (the square points in Figure 4) the positively valenced justification makes the proposal seem most democratic (marginal mean = 2.13 [2.07; 2.20])¹⁰ and the self-serving justification makes the autocratic action seem least democratic (marginal mean = 1.84 [1.78; 1.90]), compared to when no justification is given (marginal mean = 1.98 [1.92; 2.05]). Second, a *selfless* democratic defense (the circular points) lowers citizens' democracy evaluations, even in the presence of a positively valenced justification. Third, there is evidence that a *self-interested* democratic defense (the triangular points) impacts respondent democracy evaluations *less* than a selfless democratic defense. This is especially clear when a positively valenced justification is presented (marginal mean = 2.21 [2.11; 2.30], compared to 1.90). In fact, when a self-

⁹We deviate from our preregistration by analyzing the three way interaction across three rather than four subgroups. We show in the Online Appendix that our conclusions hold when looking at four subgroups.

¹⁰To make the comparisons easier, we switch to presenting the marginal means and 95% confidence intervals here (but see the Online Appendix for the full regression results).

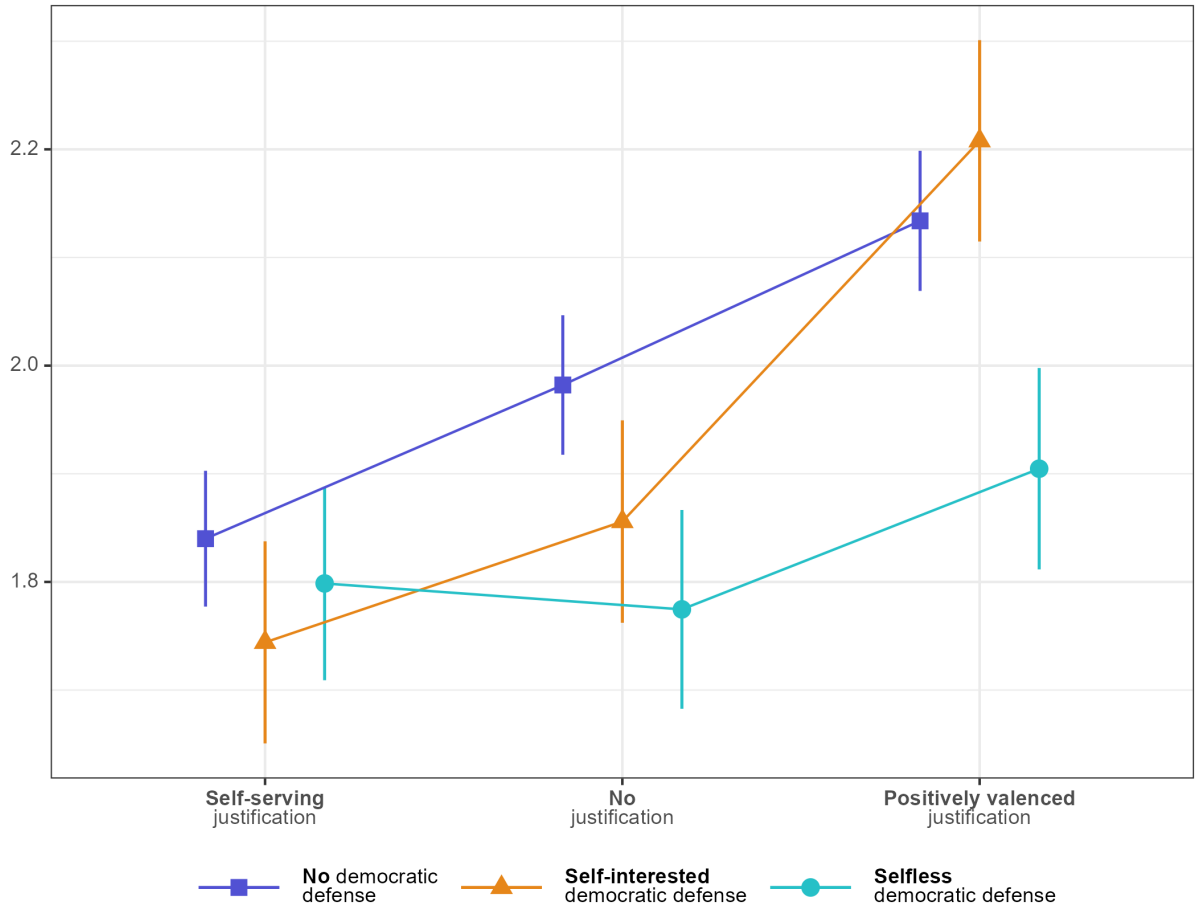


Figure 4: Marginal means with 95% confidence intervals of the effects of different types of democratic defense. The lines connecting the dots are added to provide clarity for how to interactions crosscut. Higher scores mean the vignette is evaluated as *more* democratic (and consequently that democratic defense, if present, has mattered less).

interested democratic defense is mounted against an action is justified with an appeal to a positively valenced good, democratic defense does not significantly change respondents' democracy evaluation (marginal mean = 2.21 [2.11; 2.30], compared to 2.13, when there is no democratic defense).

These observations combined provide insights into the competitive information environment of democratic defense, showing the difficulties of democratic defense. When elites are materially self-interested they can successfully defend democracy, but only if

the incumbent is unambiguously autocratic. When the incumbent introduces ambiguity by an appeal to a positively valenced good, democratic defense becomes harder and self-interested democratic defenders fail to effectively cue autocratization to citizens. When the autocratic proposal is more ambiguous, only selfless democratic defenders can effectively cue autocratization to citizens.

In conclusion our main findings are that first of all elite democratic defense does matter.¹¹ When a democratic defender speaks out about the autocratic nature of an incumbent's autocratic proposal, many citizens are willing to be critical of the incumbent (supporting *H1*). Second, the more selfless democratic defenders are, the more their democratic defense is able to affect citizens (supporting *H2*). Third, the autocratizing incumbent can, in contrast, also affect citizens' perceptions by providing justifications for the autocratic proposal (supporting *H3a* and *H3b*). However, we find no clear-cut evidence that democratic defenders can leverage these justifications (in line with the test of *H4* in Model 3 of Figure 3).

When we look at the full informational environment, taking into account both the position of the defender (self-interested or selfless) and the incumbent justification (self-serving or positively valenced), we thus find some evidence that selfless democratic defense against ambiguous autocratization can change citizens' minds (in partial support of *H5*). But this success is tenuous at best, because when democratic defenders appear to be self-interested and react to such a proposal, the defense fails to convince citizens. This is in line with our general theoretical premise that democratic defenders face an uphill

¹¹The Online Appendix shows that these results hold when we estimate heterogeneous treatment effects across party, ideology, and country sub samples. We argue this is not only an indication of substantial effects of interest, but also that our findings are generalizable to the wider population of liberal and consolidated democracies.

battle. We explore this uphill battle further in the next section. We delve deeper into by exploring the causal mechanisms underpinning the effects of democratic defense and incumbent justifications in the next section.

4.4 Explanations of the Causal Effects

We theorized that the conditional effects of democratic defense are caused by whether respondents perceive democratic defenders as *credibly* committed to democracy or, conversely, materially self-interested. Moreover, we theorized that the efficacy of incumbent justifications depend on whether they increase or decrease the autocratic action’s *ambiguity*. In this section, we show that these causal arguments hold empirically employing a Structural Equation Model. To facilitate interpretation, we show the results graphically in Figure 5, but the Online Appendix shows the results of the full mediation analysis, including goodness of fit-measures and included but not shown covariates. All three models satisfy the standard goodness of fit-requirements. The Online Appendix also shows that standard OLS models with the mediators as outcomes (of the treatments) and predictors (of the democracy evaluation) lead to the same substantive conclusions.

When it comes to credibility, the theorized causal mechanism postulated that a self-interested democratic defense decreases the perceived credibility of the defender. If defenders lack credibility, respondents should in turn evaluate the proposal as more democratic.

Figure 5, panel A shows that when the democratic defender is self-interested (i.e. the judiciary defending against a proposal to limit judicial independence), they are perceived to be significantly more motivated by their own material self-interest and job-security than by their commitment to democracy ($\beta = -0.17, p = 0.02$). In turn, the more credible democratic defenders are, the less democratic the proposal is evaluated by respondents

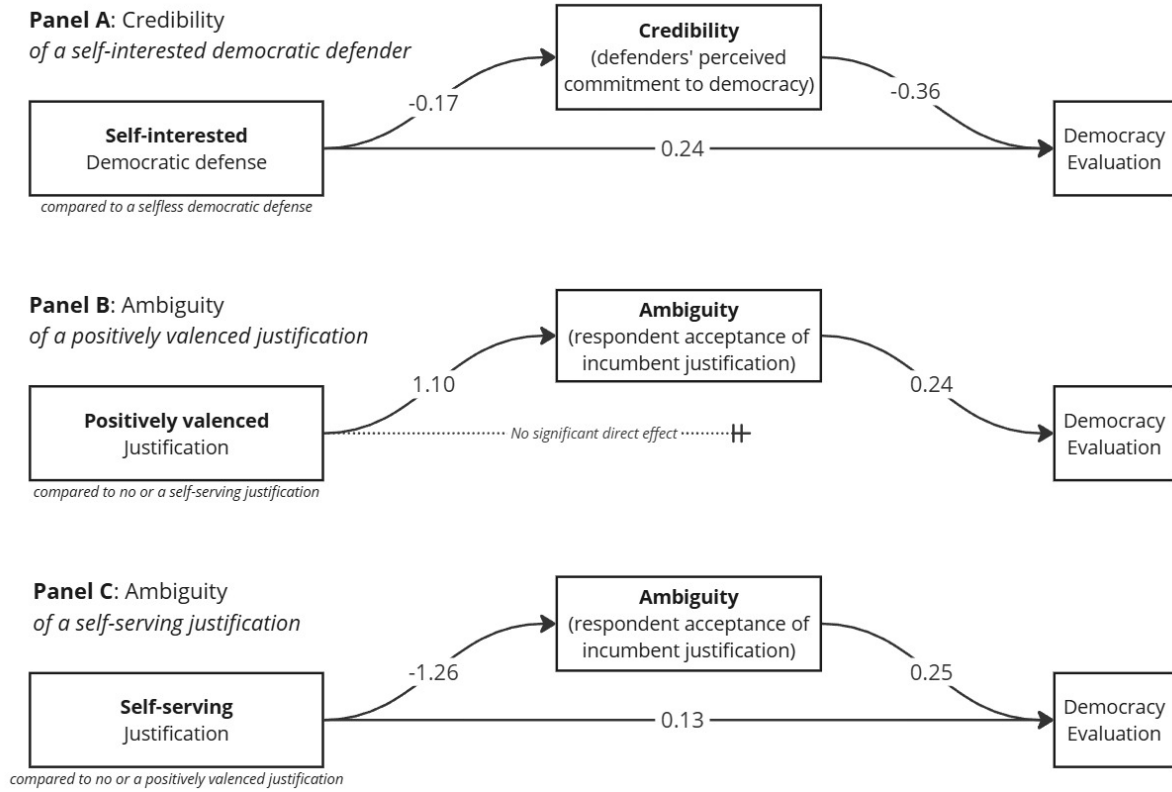


Figure 5: The mediation of ambiguity and credibility. Other treatments and unbalanced covariates are included in the analysis, but are not included in the figure. All coefficients are significant at $\alpha = 0.05$. See the Online Appendix for the full results. Higher democracy evaluations indicate respondents find the proposal *more* democratic (and consequently that democratic defense, if present, has mattered less).

($\beta = -0.36, p < 0.001$); or conversely when democratic defenders are seen as less committed to democracy (because they appear to be more materially self-interested), the proposal is seen as more democratic.

Substantively, this is first evidence that democratic defense works *when* democratic defenders appear to be genuinely committed to democracy. If they do not appear to be genuinely committed to democracy, but instead are perceived to be motivated by material self-interest, democratic defense does not work. Our results show elite defenders' credibility is a causal factor in how respondents evaluate autocratization attempts.

Turning to ambiguity, the theorized causal mechanism posited that a positively valenced justification (i.e. an appeal to the fight against corruption) increases respondents' perceptions of ambiguity, which in turn should lead to higher democracy evaluations; while a self-serving justification has the opposite effect.

Figure 5, panel B shows that when the autocratic action is justified with an appeal to a positively valenced goal, this justification is seen as more important in democracy than media- or judicial independence, indicating increased ambiguity ($\beta = 1.10, p < 0.001$). Conversely, panel C shows that when the autocratizing incumbent employs a self-serving justification, respondents lean towards the media- and judicial independence rather than the justification, indicating a lack of ambiguity ($\beta = -1.26, p < 0.001$). In turn, any increase in ambiguity increases how democratic respondents evaluate the proposal to be ($\beta = 0.24, p < 0.001$; and $\beta = 0.25, p < 0.001$). This is first evidence that justifications can veil the autocratic nature of proposals *because* the proposal's ambiguity (or lack thereof) is a causal factor in how respondents evaluate autocratization attempts.

Based on these results, when ambiguity and credibility collide, we argue it is ambiguity that appears to prevail. Not only do our main findings show that incumbents are able to mask the autocratic nature of their proposals, this ambiguity is also picked up to a large extent by citizens. Credibility, on the other hand, plays a smaller role for democratic defenders. Yes, citizens who believe the judiciary is genuinely committed to democracy are more likely to heed their democratic defense. However, the effect of a positively valenced justification on ambiguity is substantially larger than the effect of a selfless democratic defense. In other words: it appears to be harder to be perceived as a credible democratic defender, than it is for an incumbent to make autocratization seem democratic. In addition, the direct effect of a self-serving justification on the democracy evaluation

($\beta = 0.13, p < 0.001$) suggests there are likely some respondents for whom any justification – self-serving or positively valenced – is sufficient to make a proposal seem democratic. Finally, any justification appears to lower the credibility of the democratic defender. This is in line with our initial assumption that democratic defense is possible, but that the defenders are facing an uphill battle. It is easier for an autocratizing incumbent in a democratic country to delegitimize the democratic defenders, than it is for democratic defenders to appear credibly committed to democracy.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Democracies around the world face the challenge of democratic recession: democratically elected incumbents who seek to aggrandize executive power at the expense of democratic norms and principles. Scholarship has established that citizens are, to a large extent, susceptible to accept violations of democratic norms - especially in polarized contexts or when proposed by a party or candidate the citizen supports. We build on this literature, and seek to understand under what circumstances citizens follow a democratic defender who posits a pro-democratic counterclaim to these autocratic proposals.

Our argument in this paper is threefold. One, resisters against autocratization – democratic defenders – provide a counter narrative that a proposal harms democracy. They aim to persuade citizens that autocratic action is, in fact, autocratic. For many citizens, this should cue their commitment to democracy, and result in a lower evaluation of the democratic quality of the proposal. However, two, it is hard for democratic defenders to appear genuinely committed to democracy. In many cases, defenders can be perceived to have an ulterior motive (job security, political gain) to accuse the incumbent of autocratization. That is: not all democratic defenders are always credible in their defense. Moreover,

three, autocratizing incumbents can try to make autocratization seem as legitimate and democratic as possible. By appealing to positively valenced goods (operationalized as the fight against corruption), autocratizing incumbents aim to persuade citizens that the autocratic action is either not autocratic or necessary. We call this the ambiguous nature of autocratic action. Overall, we argue that citizen response to elite democratic defense (and by extension, citizen evaluation of the democratic quality of the proposal) is determined by a trade-off between the elite democratic defenders' credibility and the autocratic action's ambiguity (van Lit et al., 2023).

To test this, we fielded a factorial experiment in the Netherlands ($n = 3012$), Germany ($n = 3201$), and France ($n = 2945$), for a total of 9,158 respondents, in July and August 2023. In this experiment, we manipulated three experimental conditions: the justification provided by the autocratizing incumbent (to simulate whether autocratization is ambiguous or not), the target of the proposal (to simulate defenders' self-interest when their institution is targeted), and the presence or absence of a democratic defense. Importantly, the vignette simulated autocratic action in Norway, a country that respondents very clearly identified as democratic, but likely do not have strong partisan or incumbency knowledge about. As such, we eliminate party-effects and incumbency-effects, and allow respondents to completely focus on the autocratic action and the democratic defense.

The experiment provides strong, yet nuanced, evidence for all three of our arguments. First of all: elite democratic defense does matter. When a democratic defender speaks out about the autocratic nature of an incumbent's autocratic proposal, many citizens are willing to be critical of the incumbent (*H1*). Second, the more selfless democratic defenders are, the more their democratic defense is able to affect citizens (*H2*). Third, the autocratizing incumbent can, in contrast, also affect citizens' perceptions by pro-

viding justifications for the autocratic proposal (*H3a* and *H3b*). We theorized that if the incumbent justification reveals some ‘autocratic intent’, by being overtly self-serving, any democratic defender could leverage this. However, we find no clear-cut evidence for this (*H4*). But when we look at the full informational environment, taking into account both the position of the defender (self-interested or selfless) and the incumbent justification (self-serving or positively valenced), we do find evidence that under specific circumstances, the democratic defense can be the strongest claim: only when democratic defenders are selfless can they counter an autocratic proposal that is justified with an appeal to a positively valenced good (*H5*). But this success is tenuous at best, because when democratic defenders appear to be self-interested and react to such a proposal, the defense might actually backlash. We delve deeper into this by also exploring the causal mechanisms underpinning the effects of democratic defense and incumbent justifications. We show that democratic defense is effective because both credibility and ambiguity are causal factors in determining how citizens respond to autocratic proposals.

The case of hypothetical autocratization in Norway provides a strict test for these claims. For one, respondents recognize Norway as clearly democratic, so it is unlikely that just any claim critical of the democratically elected government should carry much weight. Second, in our vignette, the incumbent adheres to procedural democratic norms: going through parliament, and waiting on parliamentary approval. In that light, the effect of elite democratic defense on citizen evaluations is indeed a positive story. However, the success of democratic defense is in no way guaranteed. We have outlined the pitfalls and the difficulty of the balancing act that democratic defenders face: they must not appear to be self-interested (unless the action is unambiguously autocratic). For democratic resilience, this shows how important the role of the *actors* within the institutions is.

When it comes to the importance of the judiciary as the ‘last bulwark against autocracy’ (Boese, Lindberg, and Lührmann, 2021; Staton et al., 2022), our results urge caution. Yes, the courts can defend democracy against autocratic actions targeting the media (when there is no justification provided by the incumbent) and the courts themselves (when there is a self-serving justification provided by the incumbent, signaling unambiguous autocratization), but their defense is not a save-all, as shown by the potential backlash against a self-interested democratic defense. This suggests that within limited space, judges, bureaucrats, parliamentarians, and other actors can stand up to pinpoint which rules are broken.

In further contrast to the positive story about the success of democratic defense, our results also shows the fragility of a democratic system, as autocratizing incumbents can sacrifice democracy (or intentionally autocratize) to achieve certain policy goals. An appeal to a positively valenced goal causes respondents to see autocratic action as *more* democratic. Even without partisan cues, citizens can follow the incumbent, especially when the policy goal has a positive connotation. We only limited our experiment to the positively valenced goal of curbing corruption, but recognize many other positively valenced goals could have similar (or worse) anti-democratic effects. On the flip side, ‘clear autocratic intent’ – signaled by a self-serving justification – results consistently in lower democracy evaluations.

Where previous literature shows that citizens are willing to trade-off democracy for something else (Graham and Svolik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2023), we show that citizens are less willing to do so when they are faced with the explicit consequence that it harms democracy. And where other research shows the positive effect of democratic defense when they adhere to non-violent means and moderate goals (Cleary and Öztürk, 2022;

Gamboa, 2022), we add an additional requirement: democratic defenders must be more credible than the action is ambiguous. To sum up: democratic defense matters, but the ‘vexing ambiguity’ (Bermeo, 2016) of autocratization does limit its efficacy. The credibility of democratic defenders is not given and can severely hamper the effect of democratic defense.

We acknowledge that our study is only a first step in teasing out the trade-offs for citizens and democratic defenders. And suggest five avenues for future research. First, ambiguity does not only revolve around the contrast between explicit power grabs and the fight against corruption. It extends to referendums, states of emergency, economic improvements, *et cetera*. Furthermore, in certain extreme circumstances, one could make the argument that limits to democracy might be necessary and legitimate. Many constitutions also allow for (temporary) limitations on democratic rights during crises. Given the troubling results in this paper, it is necessary that future research examines how these other aspects of ambiguity occur empirically and what their effects are on citizens.

Second, we have also not tried to establish whether some democratic institutions are targeted more successfully than others. While we found no difference between attacks on the judiciary and the media, in real life, autocratic actions are not equivalent. Future research should study whether citizens react differently to autocratic actions targeting different democratic institutions. Moreover, likely the first autocratic action is more easily disguised than subsequent autocratic actions. When attacks on democracy continue, at some point autocratization might reach a ‘tipping point’. At this point, either further autocratization becomes inevitable as many avenues for democratic defense have been closed or citizens voice their resistance independently of elite defenders.

Third, autocratization and democratic defense does not occur in a vacuum. The

core question in this paper was to examine the effect of elite democratic defense on citizen democracy evaluations, which necessitated the absence of partisan cues. However, partisan cues are almost always present empirically. Even if elite democratic defenders are institutionally neutral, autocratizing incumbents can blame them of partisan bias. In extension of the existing literature and this paper, further research should examine how perceptions of *democratic defense* (and not just autocratization) are affected by these partisan cues.

Fourth, defenders' credibility arguably does not solely rely on whether they are self-interested or not. Credibility might depend on partisan loyalty, perceived knowledge, playing political games, et cetera. In addition, democratic defenders could increase their credibility with arguments *why* the proposal is undemocratic. As a counterweight to the incumbent justification, democratic defenders can and arguably should provide informational cues (to citizens and other potential defenders) about the autocratizing effect of an incumbent's action.

Lastly, the vignette presents an abstracted version of reality to respondents. This limits our findings not as much in terms of internal validity, but potentially more so in external validity (Egami and Hartman, 2023). In particular, we ask respondents in liberal democracies to envision autocratization in Norway – another liberal democracy. This is useful to test the effects of our treatments in the absence of partisan cues, but does sacrifice external validity to a certain degree. The main question we cannot answer in this regard is whether respondents are more critical of autocratization in a third country compared to autocratization in their own country (and hence potentially more susceptible to democratic defense) or less critical.

Despite these possible extensions of our research, it is clear that the success of demo-

cratic defense is possible, but in no way guaranteed. And even for established, recognized, consolidated democracies like Norway, citizens' views regarding democracy is all too easily manipulated when credibility and ambiguity collide.

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