The End of 'Critical Citizens'?
How Polarization Undermines Diffuse Support for Democracy

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Where the Project Fits

▶ PhD thesis on citizens' commitment to liberal democracy

▶ 3-papers:
  ▶ Citizens' **conceptions of democracy**: liberal *and* populist?
  ▶ The effect of **political polarization** on citizens' support for democracy
  ▶ Disentangling the **web of attitudes towards democracy**: populism, illiberalism, or authoritarianism?

The Theory of the 'Critical Citizen'

Dissatisfied citizens need not be unsupportive of democracy. In fact, many of them:

> '[aspire] to democracy as their ideal form of government, yet at the same time they remain deeply skeptical when evaluating how democracy works in their own country' (Norris 2011: 5)
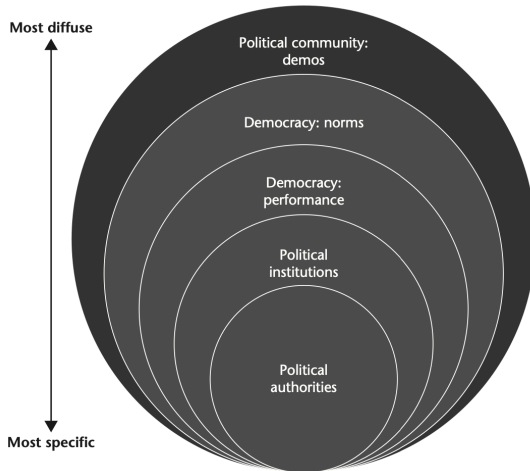
Specific versus Diffuse Support

Figure 1: Adapted from Norris (1999)

Critical Citizens Should Meet a Double Standard

Condition 1

They should become *less satisfied* when *democracy declines* but not *less supportive of democracy*.

Condition 2

They should become *less satisfied* when *democracy declines* but not *less supportive of democracy*, even in a context of *high polarization*.

How Polarization Makes Citizens 'Uncritical'

	Feeling	Political Attitude	Uncritical Behavior
'Us'	Attachment	Hyper-partisanship	Rationalization
'Versus'	Anxiety	Defensiveness	Condonment
'Them'	Anger	Demonization	Endorsement

Source: Own elaboration.
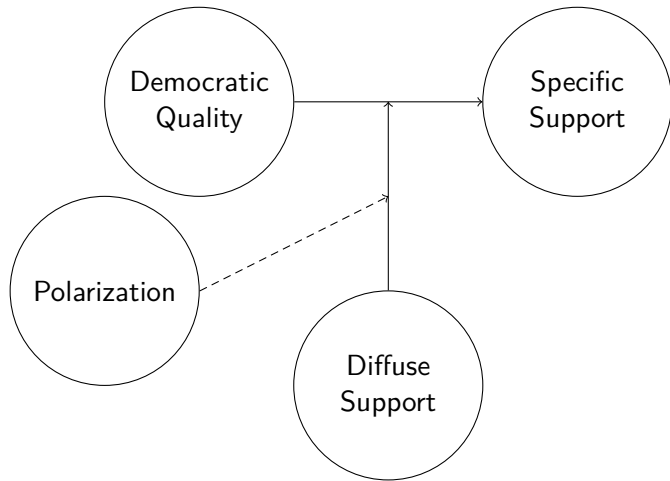
Null Hypotheses Derived from Critical Citizens Theory

$H_{0-minimal}$

A decline in *democratic quality* has a negative effect on *specific support* among respondents with high *diffuse support*.

$H_{0-demanding}$

A decline in *democratic quality* has a negative effect on *specific support* among respondents with high *diffuse support* even when *polarization* is high.

The Argument Visualized

Data and Estimation Strategy

- ▶ **WVS/EVS** (individual level) & **V-Dem** (aggregate level)
- ▶ **Coverage**: 31 countries, 5 waves (1995-2022)

- ▶ **Individual-level variables**: specific support and diffuse support
- ▶ **Aggregate-level variables**: democratic quality and political polarization

- ▶ ML models applied to TSCS data: **REWB models** (Fairbrother 2014)
- ▶ Cross-level interactions (Giesselmann and Schmidt-Catran 2019; Heisig and Schaeffer 2019)

Variables (Individual-Level)

Specific support: *confidence in government* and *confidence in political parties* ('*none at all*', '*not very much*', '*quite a lot*', and '*a great deal*').

Diffuse support: 1. '*Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections*' 2. '*Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country*' 3. '*Having the army rule*' 4. '*Having a democratic political system*'.

Variables (Aggregate-Level)

Democratic Quality: *electoral democracy index* (EDI) (Coppedge et al. 2023)

Political Polarization: measures '*the extent to which political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussions. Societies are highly polarized if supporters of opposing political camps are reluctant to engage in friendly interactions, for example, in family functions, civic associations, their free time activities and workplaces*' (Coppedge et al. 2023)

Example Code in R using `lme4`

Testing $H_{0-\text{minimal}}$

```
lmer(specific ~ 1 + democracy_WE + democracy_BE
+ diffuse + democracy_WE*diffuse +
democracy_WE*diffuse_BE + democracy_BE*diffuse
+ diffuse_BE + year + (1 + diffuse |
country/country-year), data = df)
```

▶ How about $H_{0-\text{demanding}}$? Three-way cross-level interaction?

Thanks for your attention!

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References

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