

RENEWING DEMOCRACY

How Exposure to Electoral Turnovers Reinforces Citizens' Democratic Support

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ABSTRACT

A prevailing narrative argues that citizens who live under democratic rule take it for granted, potentially leading to democratic backsliding. This article advances a more optimistic perspective, arguing that electoral turnovers—that is, elections that displace the head of government—reinforce democratic support. To test this argument, the author merges multiple international surveys that cover more than 350,000 respondents in seventy-nine countries, matches those surveys with a century's worth of electoral data, and identifies the national electoral turnovers to which each respondent was exposed throughout their life. Cohort analysis shows that exposure to turnovers, especially those that occur after prolonged periods of incumbency, has a positive and lasting effect on democratic support. Further analysis reveals that the effect is positive in a wide range of contexts, but is strongest among citizens who have always lived in a democracy. This finding thus suggests that frequent electoral turnovers are important to renew citizens' support for democracy.

INTRODUCTION

DEMOCRACY is in danger when citizens cease to support it. Indeed, influential scholarship in comparative politics argues and shows that citizens' support for democracy is a necessary condition for its stabilization and consolidation.¹ Without such support, ill-intentioned politicians can exploit their power to undermine democratic rules and principles, gradually transitioning the country toward dictatorship.² Conversely, citizens who are convinced by democratic ideals serve as gatekeepers against antidemocratic actions, typically by voting out the candidates responsible for such evolution.³

Although global support for democracy remains strong, recent cases of democratic backsliding in Brazil, Hungary, the Philippines, Turkey,

¹ Claassen 2020a; Lipset 1959; Linz and Stepan 1996.

² Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Przeworski 2019.

³ Almond and Verba 1963; Bermeo 2016; Carey et al. 2022; Svobik 2023.

the United States, and other countries have sparked significant concerns.⁴ These incidents have been linked to declining democratic support, especially among younger generations, although some debate the existence of generational discrepancies.⁵ In the United States, for example, increased polarization appears to push citizens to tolerate undemocratic behavior if it ensures the victory of their preferred candidate.⁶ In Europe, far-right supporters seem willing to do the same for partisan gains.⁷ More generally, when democratic governments fail to implement effective policies or ensure satisfactory living standards, public faith in democracy often wavers.⁸ The evidence showing that citizens gradually devalue democracy over time, presumably because they take it for granted, is even more concerning.⁹

Amid this bleak context, I offer a more optimistic perspective in this article, arguing that electoral turnovers—that is, elections resulting in a partisan alternation in the effective head of government (whether prime minister or president)—bolster citizens' support for democracy. In a nutshell, my argument is that not all citizens fully grasp democracy and its benefits, and electoral turnovers serve as informational shocks that enhance their understanding. I test this hypothesis by merging individual-level data from global surveys and matching them with more than a century of electoral data to identify national-government changes experienced by some 350,000 respondents in 79 countries and 276 country-year-surveys. I focus on partisan changes, since a mere change in leadership within the same party or an autocratic succession does not constitute a meaningful turnover.¹⁰

Using cohort analysis that exploits variations between individuals within the same country-year-survey but born at different times, I find a positive and lasting effect of exposure to electoral turnovers across countries and political systems. This effect is substantially larger than that of exposure to nonturnover elections, and is particularly strong in liberal democracies and after prolonged periods of incumbency. Additionally, the positive impact of exposure to electoral turnovers on democratic support is more pronounced among respondents who have always lived

⁴ Regarding global support for democracy, see Anderson, Bol, and Ananda 2021; Norris 2011; van Ham et al. 2017.

⁵ Claassen and Magalhães 2023; Foa and Mounk 2017; Frederiksen 2024; Norris 2017; Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2022.

⁶ Graham and Svolik 2020; Krishnarajan 2023a; Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022.

⁷ Svolik et al. 2023.

⁸ Magalhães 2014; Mattes and Bratton 2007.

⁹ Claassen 2020b.

¹⁰ Przeworski 1991.

in a democracy, and among those who are more educated. These findings support the argument that electoral turnovers act as informational shocks for individuals who minimally follow current political developments in their country, and for those who have not experienced a counterfactual regime (such as a dictatorship), as they have more to learn about the uniqueness of democracy as a system of government. Finally, a placebo test reveals that respondents are not affected by electoral turnovers occurring before they were born.

This article is the first to explore the long-term impact of exposure to electoral turnovers on democratic attitudes. To my knowledge, the only comparable study is by Devra Moehler and Staffan Lindberg, who find a positive effect of turnovers on specific political support indicators such as trust in government.¹¹ However, their study does not address whether these turnovers influence support for democracy as a system of government. Moreover, it focuses only on short-term impacts and is limited to Africa, whereas this article takes a long-term global perspective.

My findings contribute to three strands of literature in comparative politics. First, they speak to the vast literature on how life experiences with democratic and authoritarian regimes shape democratic attitudes.¹² Specifically, they offer insights into the contradictory findings regarding long-term exposure to democratic regimes, which either bolsters or dampens support for democracy.¹³ This article suggests that such an effect depends, at least in part, on the electoral dynamics within democracies.

Second, it contributes to the literature exploring whether younger generations in contemporary democracies are less supportive of democratic ideals, perhaps because they take these ideals for granted.¹⁴ My results indicate that differences in support for democracy are at least partly driven by life-cycle effects, and specifically by younger cohorts who have not yet experienced an electoral turnover. This finding stands in sharp contrast to studies that assume the existence of enduring generational divides, which create long-term risks for democratic sustainability.

Finally, this article contributes to the debate on the optimal arrangement of political institutions for governing a country.¹⁵ This literature

¹¹ Moehler and Lindberg 2009.

¹² Bernhard and Karakoç 2007; Evans and Whitefield 1995; Neundorff 2010; Mattes and Bratton 2007; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017.

¹³ For bolstering support for democracy see, e.g., Acemoglu et al. 2025. For dampening support, see, e.g., Claassen 2020b.

¹⁴ Claassen and Magalhães 2022; Frederiksen 2024; Norris 2017.

¹⁵ Blais et al. 2023; Carey and Hix 2011; Norris 2004; Shugart and Wattenberg 2003.

often highlights the trade-off between stability and inclusivity in political institutions, arguing that overly consensual systems could lead to democratic erosion due to frequent turnovers. My findings suggest that the impact of governmental changes on democratic support is largely positive for citizens' democratic attitudes.

WHY EXPOSURE TO ELECTORAL TURNOVERS SHOULD BOLSTER LONG-TERM DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT

In this section, I review the relevant literature to explain why we can expect exposure to electoral turnovers to positively influence citizens' support for democracy in the long run, which is the central hypothesis of this article. First, I discuss the findings of empirical studies on the legacy of life experiences on citizens' support for democracy, and I demonstrate how my hypothesis follows a similar mechanism. Second, I examine the scholarship on electoral turnovers, emphasizing their significance for democratic theory, and show how this literature makes a strong case for my hypothesis.

LEGACY OF LIFE EXPERIENCES ON CITIZENS' SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY

Empirical research on the factors shaping citizens' support for democracy largely focuses on the events that they have experienced over their lifetime. Typically, the research shows that citizens are affected by an exposure to dictatorship during their youth, leading to notable differences between younger and older cohorts in newly democratized countries.¹⁶ The direction of the effect, however, depends on the characteristics of the previous authoritarian regime, such as whether it was exclusionary or economically affluent.¹⁷

More generally, this literature acknowledges that citizens who benefit or have benefited from a regime, whether economically or politically, tend to show greater support for that regime.¹⁸ Given the relatively beneficent performance of democracies in providing public goods, support for democracy is generally high.¹⁹ However, such support diminishes when a democracy fails to deliver.²⁰ This is especially true as the share of

¹⁶ Neundorff 2010; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017.

¹⁷ For the difference between exclusionary and inclusionary authoritarian regimes, see Neundorff, Gerschewski, and Olar 2020. For the difference between affluent and poor regimes, see Krishnarajan, Doucette, and Andersen 2023.

¹⁸ Bratton and Mattes 2001; Neundorff, Gerschewski, and Olar 2020.

¹⁹ Acemoglu et al. 2025; Mattes and Bratton 2007.

²⁰ Magalhães 2014, although it depends on the survey indicator, see Claassen and Magalhães 2022.

people who have never experienced autocracy grows, as they are more likely to take for granted the benefits of democracy.²¹

A common assumption in these studies is that citizens, *ex ante*, know little about regimes and their consequences. They learn about regimes through life experiences: for example, they learn what autocracy is when they are exposed to one. The learning process primarily occurs when young individuals are socialized into politics during their impressionable years.²² This early period, which tends to be especially formative, can leave long-lasting marks on political attitudes. Yet learning does not stop there: individuals continue to update their views in response to consequential political events encountered later in life, such as regime transformations.²³ Political attitudes thus reflect a mix of older experiences that may persist or fade over time, depending on their intensity, and more contemporary events that carry particular weight due to recency mechanisms.²⁴ Building on this logic, I hypothesize that citizens learn about democracy when they experience an electoral turnover. I also test whether turnovers occurring during an individual's impressionable years have stronger effects than those experienced later in life, and whether the impact of turnovers diminishes as these events recede into the past.

ELECTORAL TURNS AND DEMOCRATIC THEORY

Prominent political philosophers such as John Stuart Mill and Robert Dahl have long recognized the importance of power rotation for democracies.²⁵ But it was Adam Przeworski who placed electoral alternations at the center of modern definitions of democracy in political science.²⁶ Przeworski asserts that these alternations constitute the sole necessary and sufficient condition for democracy to exist. According to him, political alternations are crucial for healthy democracies because they ensure leadership renewal and prevent any elite group from dominating all levers of power.

These alternations also activate the accountability and responsiveness mechanisms that are vital for democracy. When leaders know they can lose elections and be replaced, they are incentivized to perform well and to act in the citizens' interest. Furthermore, electoral turnovers

²¹ Claassen 2020b.

²² Neundorff 2010; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017. See also, for example, another article in this issue: Oosterom, Gukurume, and Chishiri 2026.

²³ Mattes and Bratton 2007; Mishler and Rose 2007.

²⁴ Achen and Bartels 2016; Healy and Lenz 2014. The term *recency mechanism* comes from psychology to describe the fact that people are more likely to remember and be affected by the last thing that happened to them.

²⁵ Mill 1861; Dahl 1989.

²⁶ Przeworski 1991. Also see Aron 1982.

legitimize the system by demonstrating that political elites abide by the rules and will peacefully relinquish power upon defeat, signaling their commitment to democratic ideals.²⁷

Empirical scholarship on electoral turnovers mostly focuses on identifying the diverse causes of these phenomena: Some causes are political, such as existing dissension between partners in coalition cabinets.²⁸ Some are institutional, such as the existence of a majoritarian electoral system or a presidential form of government.²⁹ And other causes are socioeconomic, such as the rise of economic and political grievances against the government.³⁰

Meanwhile, studies on the consequences of turnovers mostly explore the economic impacts, highlighting that the uncertainty generated by government alternations cools financial markets and slows growth.³¹ But positive returns such as reduced corruption outweigh these negative effects.³² To my knowledge, only Moehler and Lindberg examine whether these turnovers affect citizens' democratic attitudes.³³ However, their study focuses on the immediate effects and specific support indicators, rather than on diffuse support for democracy as a system. The difference is important, as only the latter set of attitudes will ensure democratic stability.³⁴

Compelling reasons lead us to believe that electoral turnovers should affect democratic support in the population. The literature on the legacy of life experiences suggests that citizens do not fully understand how democracy functions, but that they learn from political events. If we assume this to be true, then electoral turnovers clearly constitute information shocks that generate "Bayesian updating." When an electoral turnover occurs, citizens learn that incumbents are committed to the regime and willing to give away power, and that the regime ensures accountability mechanisms that benefit society as a whole, and each citizen individually, at least in the long run. By observing an electoral turnover, citizens learn about democracy's effective functioning. This leads to greater support for democracy, similar to the effects of ad-hoc training sessions about democracy and its collective benefits.³⁵

The learning mechanism described above has important implications for the citizen groups most affected by an exposure to electoral

²⁷ Anderson et al. 2005.

²⁸ Sartori 1976.

²⁹ Lijphart 2012; Powell 1982.

³⁰ Molina 2001; Pacek and Radcliff 1995.

³¹ Alesina et al. 1996; Horowitz, Hoff, and Milanovic 2009.

³² Marx, Pons, and Rollet 2025.

³³ Moehler and Lindberg 2009.

³⁴ Claassen 2020a; Easton 1975.

³⁵ Finkel, Neundorff, and Rascón Ramírez 2024.

turnovers. First, the argument suggests that individuals who have experienced both democratic rule and dictatorial rule, and have lived through major episodes of political alternation during regime changes, should be less influenced by turnover because they know the counterfactual to democracy and they understand the importance of power rotation. Additionally, in autocracies, the regime's mechanics, particularly the absence of alternation at the top, are more salient to ordinary citizens due to the need for leaders to exert strong (personalized) control over the population.³⁶ As a result, the turnover effect should be weaker among citizens who have experienced dictatorship during their lifetime.

Second, the turnover effect should be moderated by political sophistication. Drawing on John Zaller's work on the role of political information in shaping public opinion, I argue that, on one hand, highly sophisticated citizens may already recognize the democratic value of electoral turnovers, and therefore are relatively unaffected by them.³⁷ On the other hand, citizens with very low levels of sophistication are also unlikely to be affected, since they tend not to follow political developments, or they may find it difficult to connect such events to the abstract functioning of democracy. In the empirical analysis, I test these implications to provide further evidence for the mechanism and to bring more nuance to the findings.

METHOD

In this section, I present the data sets that I gathered and combined to test my hypothesis. I then introduce the empirical strategy that relies on a cohort analysis.

DATA

As a first step, I compile a large survey data set by aggregating respondents from multiple sources: every survey wave from the World Values Survey, the European Values Survey, and the Global Barometer Survey.³⁸ These surveys offer three key advantages: they rely on samples that are representative of the populations in the countries covered, they provide extensive temporal and geographic coverage at a global level, and they include a question that measures support for democracy as a system of government. Typically, this question asks respondents to indicate their

³⁶ Linz 2000; Svobik 2012.

³⁷ Zaller 1992.

³⁸ Inglehart et al. 2020; European Values Study 2020; Global Barometer Survey 2020a; Global Barometer Survey 2020b; Global Barometer Survey 2020c.

level of agreement with the statement: “Democracy may have problems, but it is better than other forms of government (strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, strongly agree).”³⁹ I recode the responses on a scale from 0 to 1, where 1 represents the highest level of prodemocratic attitude and 0 the lowest.

The data set includes responses from 365,365 respondents in 79 countries, surveyed between 1995 and 2015, for a total of 276 country-year-surveys. Note that I focus on respondents who have lived in a democracy at some point, as others could not have been exposed to an electoral turnover. I maximize the global coverage and number of observations by using a broad definition of democracy that includes liberal and electoral democracies, according to V-Dem.⁴⁰ Section 1 of the supplementary material lists the years covered and the sample size (N) for each country. The mean democratic support score is relatively high at 0.77, with a standard deviation of 0.24, consistent with previous studies on the same topic for people living under democratic rule.⁴¹ I provide descriptive statistics for this variable and others in Section 2 of the supplementary material.

The second step in the preparation of the data set involves identifying all the elections to which each respondent in the data set was exposed during their lifetime, and determining whether these elections resulted in a partisan change of government. To achieve this, I match the aggregated survey data set with the V-Dem data set, which includes a variable that captures the occurrence of national elections for virtually all countries since 1900. The V-Dem data set also reveals whether these elections led to a new government leader from a different party than the previous one.⁴² In fact, the V-Dem data set offers two versions of the electoral turnover variable: one for the president (head of state) and one for the prime minister (head of government). To determine whether a country has a (semi)presidential system or a parliamentary system, I use another V-Dem variable that captures the relative power

³⁹ This question is not available in all the surveys listed above. When missing, I use the following as a substitute: “How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? (0 not important at all–10 very important).” I standardize the answers to this question so they also range between 0 and 1, but the two questions may not be perfectly comparable. In the empirical analyses, I account for any differences in this respect by country-year-survey fixed effects. In a robustness test, I limit the sample to respondents who were asked the original question about democracy as the best form of government.

⁴⁰ Coppedge et al. 2024.

⁴¹ Anderson, Bol, and Ananda 2021.

⁴² An election that results in the replacement of a nonpartisan leader with a partisan leader (or vice versa) also counts as an electoral turnover. But I do not count governmental alternations that occur outside electoral cycles, as these do not constitute electoral turnovers.

between the two roles in the state architecture, and I apply the relevant turnover variable accordingly.⁴³ Due to data availability, I include only national elections and partisan changes in the president's or prime minister's office. These constitute major electoral turnovers, that is, the ones most visible to voters, compared to partial turnovers, which only concern some junior coalition partners.⁴⁴

Given that I know the ages of all the respondents in the aggregated survey data set, I can trace the unique history of their country from their youth onward. The assumption is that respondents were exposed to these turnovers, whether they voted or not, as the turnovers occurred in their country during that time.⁴⁵ Specifically, I calculate the number of national elections and electoral turnovers that occurred in each respondent's country during their lifetime, starting from when they were fourteen years old, which is the traditional threshold to capture the time when citizens start paying attention to politics and becoming politically socialized.⁴⁶

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the independent variable: that is, the number of national electoral turnovers to which respondents have been exposed since they turned fourteen, as well as the number of national elections to which they have been exposed. The median exposure to electoral turnovers is three, and the mean number of elections is eight (median age is forty-one). This indicates that around 37 percent of national elections result in an alternation in the head of government. Importantly, more than 10 percent of respondents have never experienced any turnover, likely because they are too young or have lived in a dictatorship.

⁴³ In cases in which the president holds more power than the prime minister does, according to V-Dem, but the president is not directly elected (such as in Switzerland), I use the turnover variable related to the person who is de facto in charge of the executive.

⁴⁴ Otjes and Stiers 2022.

⁴⁵ This strategy assumes that respondents have always been citizens of the country in which they reside. Though the surveys do focus on citizens, some respondents may have been born elsewhere and become nationals later. Unfortunately, only a few surveys ask respondents whether they were born in their current country of citizenship. In a robustness test, I use the responses to this question to relax the assumption and focus on a smaller sample of respondents for whom this information is known.

⁴⁶ Jennings and Niemi 1981; Neundorff 2010. I must add a few notes here. First, for countries that became independent or split into two or more entities during the period covered in the analyses, such as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, I treat respondents surveyed in the new countries as having been exposed to the electoral turnovers that occurred in the original country when it was still unified. I treat colonies and occupied territories differently: I do not match respondents living in these countries to the electoral history of the former colonial or occupation state. Instead, I consider that before independence, these respondents lived in an autocracy without elections, which is a more accurate description of their experience. Second, I exclude respondents from "territories" not included in the V-Dem data set, such as Puerto Rico. Third, per my empirical strategy, I exclude respondents who were older than fifteen years in 1900 because I cannot identify the electoral turnovers to which they were exposed before 1900, due to the lack of data.

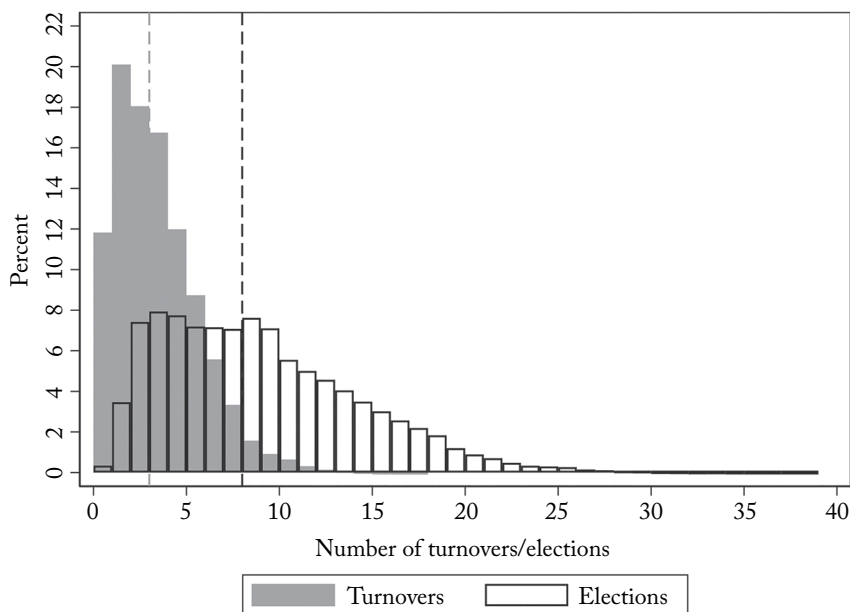


FIGURE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF LIFETIME EXPOSURE TO ELECTIONS AND
ELECTORAL TURNS^a

^a The vertical gray line (dashed) is the median number of turnovers; the vertical black line (dashed) is the median number of elections.

EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

To test my hypothesis, I estimate the following OLS regression:

$$Y_{i,j} = \alpha + \beta X_{i,j} + \gamma W_{i,j} + \mu_j + e_{i,j},$$

where Y represents the support for democracy of respondent i in country-year-survey j , and X is the core independent variable—the number of national electoral turnovers to which i has been exposed since turning fourteen years of age. In some specifications, I treat this variable as a categorical one to test for potential nonlinear effects. W is a vector of control variables, including the number of nonelectoral turnovers—that is, the number of national elections not leading to a change in the head of government, to which i has been exposed over their lifetime. Indeed, the mere exposure to elections likely shapes citizens' democratic attitudes, because these elections represent the procedures and moments that incarnate the regime.⁴⁷ The coefficient associated with this variable

⁴⁷ Flesken 2018; Krishnarajan 2023b; Singh 2025.

serves as an important benchmark to evaluate the strength of the turn-over effect.

The vector of control variables also includes the respondent's gender (in two categories) and, since the literature on the long-term effects of life experiences on support for democracy emphasizes the role of past exposure to dictatorship, the proportion of their lifetime spent in a democracy. To identify these respondents, I use the same method employed for identifying exposure to electoral turnovers: the V-Dem variable that differentiates autocracies from democracies (liberal or not). Additionally, I control for age and cohort, following standards in the literature.⁴⁸ I treat these variables as categorical variables using ten-year categories in each—that is, one for respondents aged nineteen or younger, one for those aged twenty to twenty-nine, one for those aged thirty to thirty-nine, and so on; one for those born between 1900 and 1909, one for those born between 1910 and 1919, and so on. This specification has the advantage of capturing linear and nonlinear trends in these variables. To maximize the number of observations, I do not include additional control variables. For example, unlike the age, cohort, and gender variables, the variable capturing education level has approximately 80,000 missing values. I do use it as an additional control variable in a robustness test, however.

Finally, μ represents country-year-survey fixed effects.⁴⁹ These fixed effects ensure that the analysis calculates the differences between respondents in the same country who answered the survey in the same year but were born at different times, resulting in different lifetime exposure to electoral turnovers. In other words, the analysis relies on differences among cohorts, hence the term “cohort analysis.” This specification has the advantage of controlling for the multitude of factors at the country-year-survey level that could affect support for democracy, such as whether the country is a well-functioning democracy at the time of the survey, whether the current socioeconomic environment is tumultuous, or whether a party or candidate is currently campaigning on an anti-democratic platform. These fixed effects also account for differences in the wording of questions and in the surveyors' sampling methods.

Interpreting β as the effect of interest to test my hypothesis relies on some key assumptions. First, it assumes the absence of reverse causality between electoral turnovers and democratic support. Although it is possible that prodemocratic citizens are more inclined to vote against an

⁴⁸ Krishnarajan, Doucette, and Andersen 2023.

⁴⁹ Importantly, the unit of analysis is the respondent. In that sense, the empirical strategy does not include unit fixed effects. The fixed effects are at a higher analytical level: the country-year-survey, such as the Belgium–1999–European Values Study.

incumbent, regardless of the incumbent's ideology, because they believe that alternation in power is good for democracy, this seems unlikely. Evidence shows that even in an election in which one of the candidates takes clear antidemocratic positions, citizens with the strongest democratic commitments do not always vote against these candidates.⁵⁰

Second, although country-year-survey fixed effects account for confounding variables at this level, they do not account for variables that affect the probability that, within a given country, an electoral turnover occurs in certain elections and not in others. If these variables also affect democratic support in the population, they will confound the turnover effect. It is difficult to account for such variables in the analysis, given that the independent variable is the *number* of electoral turnovers to which respondents have been exposed. To address this, I conduct heterogeneity tests in which I reestimate the OLS regression presented above, decomposing the turnover variable into multiple variables based on a series of election-level covariates. For instance, I differentiate the effect of electoral turnovers that occurred after a prolonged period of incumbency from those that did not. Although imperfect, this heterogeneity analysis provides some assurance that the effect is not entirely confounded by variables at the election level. Finally, note that this limitation is in fact common in studies that estimate the long-term effect of experiencing various regime types on support for democracy, as well as studies that estimate the long-term effects of other life experiences on political attitudes, such as going through a pandemic.⁵¹

RESULTS

In this section I present the results of the main analysis, including a series of robustness tests. Then I discuss the results of the heterogeneity analysis, in which I differentiate the turnover effect based on characteristics at the country level, individual level, and election level. This heterogeneity analysis, which is mostly exploratory, aims to assess whether the effect of electoral turnovers is stable and robust across groups and

⁵⁰ Graham and Svobik 2020; Frederiksen 2022; Krishnarajan 2023a; Simonovits, McCoy, and Litvay 2022.

⁵¹ For the effect of experiencing various regime types, see Acemoglu et al. 2025; Krishnarajan, Doucette, and Andersen 2023. For the effects of other life experiences, see Eichengreen, Saka, and Aksoy 2024. An alternative empirical strategy could have been to leverage close elections to establish a discontinuity design. But recent studies, such as Marshall 2024, have raised important concerns about the validity of such designs, due to the asymmetry in status between the incumbent and the opposition candidate/party. Additionally, focusing on observations near the discontinuity threshold severely limits the coverage of the analysis and the breadth of the results.

conditions. It also offers more confirmation of the mechanism behind the main effect, and provides more nuance.

MAIN ANALYSIS

Figure 2 shows how exposure to an additional electoral turnover, and to an additional election without turnover, can affect support for democracy in three specifications: the first specification contains only country-year-survey fixed effects, the second adds sociodemographic control variables (gender, age, and cohort), and the third adds a political control variable (proportion of years lived under democracy). The results reveal that although both coefficients are positive and statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, the effect of electoral turnovers is more than twice as large as that of nonturnover elections. In each case, the net effect of the turnover, after discounting for the effect of the election itself, lies at around +0.004. F-tests comparing the two coefficients in each regression indicate that the difference is statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

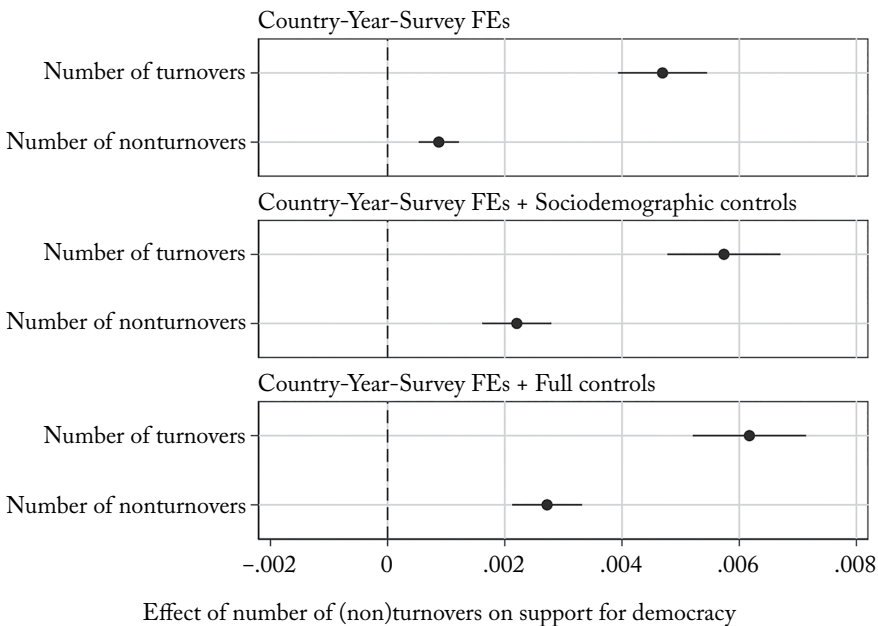


FIGURE 2
MAIN ANALYSIS^a

^a Dots represent coefficient estimates of OLS regressions predicting support for democracy (0–1). Horizontal bars are 99 percent confidence intervals. For full regression results, see Section 3 of the supplementary material.

This provides evidence of a positive effect of past exposure to electoral turnovers on support for democracy that goes beyond mere exposure to elections.⁵²

To explore the magnitude of the turnover effect, Figure 3 presents the predicted values of the dependent variable based on the regression with the fixed effects and the full set of control variables. The left panel shows that moving from zero to eight turnovers, which is the mean plus two standard deviations of the independent variable, is associated with a +0.05 increase in support for democracy (from 0.75 to 0.80). The effect is sizable, given that support for democracy is a relatively stable attitude.⁵³ By way of comparison, an increase of four percentage points represents the within-country difference between a generation that grew up under an exclusionary and repressive autocratic regime and one that did not.⁵⁴ As an alternative comparison, the same margin in the number of non-turnover elections only leads to a +0.02 increase in support for democracy, indicating that turnovers more than double the effect of “regular” elections.

The right panel of Figure 3 displays the predicted values of the dependent variable when the turnover variable is modeled categorically—that is, without imposing the assumption of linearity in the effect. The results suggest that the effect is linear, at around +0.005 for each additional turnover, with the notable exception of the gap between exposure to a single turnover versus two turnovers (+0.014). This larger difference may reflect the realization that turnovers can occur in both directions, and that electoral competition does not consistently favor the same side.⁵⁵

Figure 4 examines the temporal dimension of the turnover effect in three ways. First, I assess whether the impact of electoral turnover diminishes over time by decomposing the independent variable based on

⁵² To corroborate this finding, I replicate the regression while restricting the sample to elections that occurred in democratic systems (liberal or not), as these elections, even if they do not lead to a governmental turnover, may have a greater effect on support for democracy. Although smaller, the difference between the turnover effect and the general election effect remains positive, and an F-test shows that they are still statistically significant (see Section 3 in the supplementary material). But this result should be interpreted with caution, as experts’ evaluations of the state of democracy may be biased; Little and Meng 2024. In particular, these experts may be less strict in applying democratic criteria when an electoral turnover occurs, which would undermine comparisons between the quality of democracy in turnover and nonturnover years.

⁵³ Anderson, Bol, and Ananda 2021.

⁵⁴ Neundorff, Gerschewski, and Olar 2020.

⁵⁵ A supplementary test reported in Section 3, in which I include a squared term for the turnover variable, corroborates the conclusion that the effect is predominantly linear. Although the squared term is statistically significant and negative, indicating that the turnover effect diminishes slightly after multiple turnovers, the value of R^2 remains unchanged, implying that this alternative specification does not improve the model’s empirical fit.

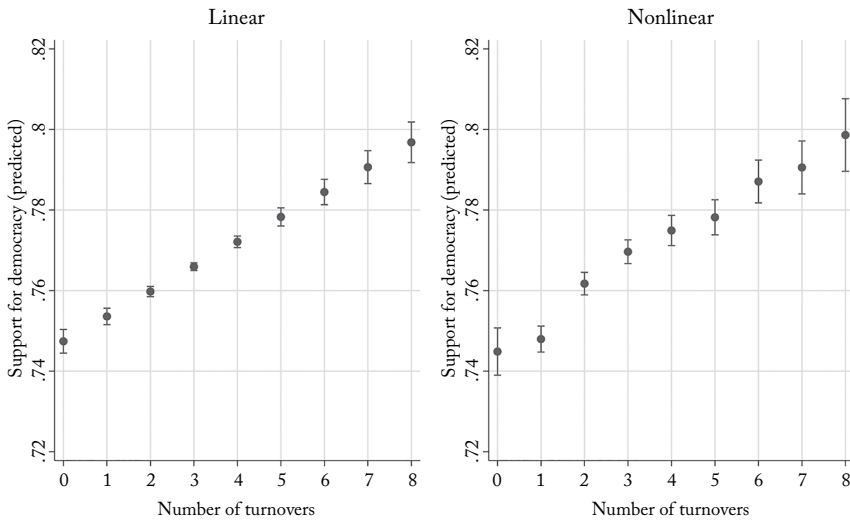


FIGURE 3
MAIN ANALYSIS (EFFECT SIZE)^a

^a Dots represent predicted values of support for democracy (0–1) at various levels of exposure to electoral turnovers based on OLS regressions, including all fixed effects, as well as controls, which are kept at their mean/mode. Vertical bars are 99 percent confidence intervals. In the left panel, the variable *number of turnovers* is treated as a continuous variable (linear). In the right panel, it is treated as a categorical variable (nonlinear). Full regression results are shown in Section 3 of the supplementary material.

the number of years between the turnover and the survey. Due to the cohort-based analysis, I cannot estimate the effect within the first two years, as there is no variation in exposure within country-year-surveys before this point: the youngest respondent is sixteen years old, and I start counting exposure from fourteen years old. This means that if an electoral turnover occurs fewer than three years before the survey, all respondents will have been exposed to it automatically. Therefore, I begin the decomposition at three years and use a ten-year interval.

The figure shows that the turnover effect does not fade over time; if anything, it becomes slightly stronger when the interval between the turnover and the survey extends beyond twenty years. The effect increases from approximately +0.005 in the earlier periods to +0.007 in the long run. This difference may result from an acceptance mechanism, whereby citizens who support opposition parties must first come to terms with electoral defeat before fully appreciating the benefits of electoral turnover. Alternatively, it may simply reflect noise in the early-period estimates, and the limited variation in exposure among respondents from the same

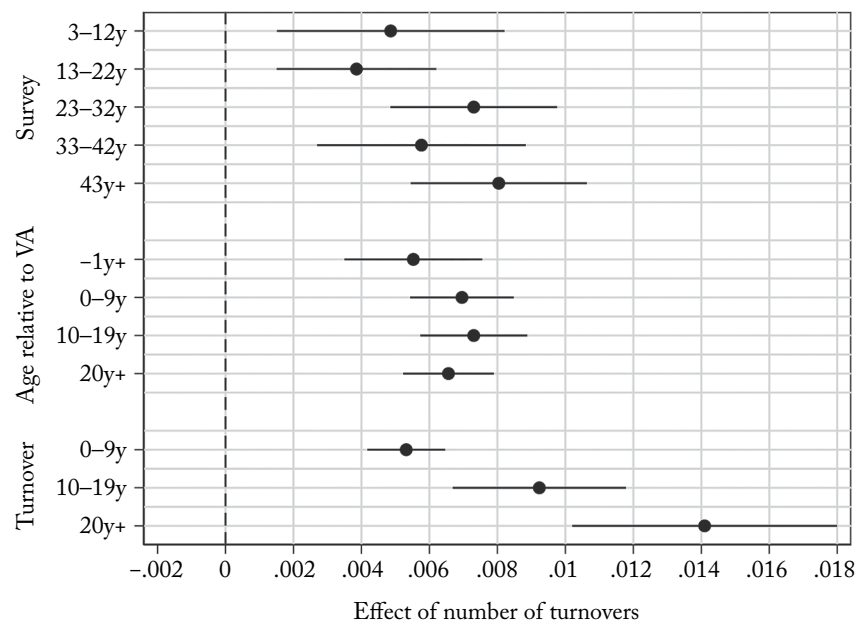


FIGURE 4
MAIN ANALYSIS (EFFECT IN TIME)^a

^a Dots represent coefficient estimates of OLS regressions predicting support for democracy (0–1), including all fixed effects as well as controls. In *survey*, I differentiate the turnover effect based on the time elapsed between the turnover and the survey; in *age relative to VA*, based on the respondents' age at the time the turnover occurred, relative to voting age in their country at the time; and in *turnover*, based on the time between the current turnover and the previous one. Horizontal bars are 99 percent confidence intervals. Full regression results are shown in Section 3 of the supplementary material.

country-year-survey units. Beyond this point the effect stabilizes, with only minor fluctuations across periods. Remarkably, even forty-three years after the electoral turnover, the effect remains at +0.008. These results confirm that the positive impact of turnover on support for democracy endures well into the long term.⁵⁶

For the second temporal dimension of the turnover effect in Figure 4, I consider the respondent's age at the time of the turnover to explore whether citizens are more sensitive to turnovers that occur during their impressionable years. To make the results more meaningful, I calculate this in relation to voting age, which is captured by a variable in the

⁵⁶ To confirm this finding, I reestimate a regression with a modified version of the turnover variable, in which I divide each turnover by the number of years since it happened. The results show that the R^2 remains similar, which means that this alternative specification does not improve the model's empirical fit, and that the fading-away pattern is indeed small.

V-Dem data set. Figure 4 shows that the turnover effect is strongest when the national electoral turnover occurred within the first twenty years after respondents became eligible to vote (+0.007), which is consistent with the impressionable-years hypothesis. Yet the effect also remains substantial in other life stages (+0.005), both prior to voting eligibility and more than twenty years thereafter, suggesting that the impact of electoral turnover on democratic support endures across the life course.

Third, I examine whether the turnover effect is stronger after a prolonged period of incumbency. Here, I group the effect based on the time elapsed between the turnover and the one that preceded it. Figure 4 shows that the effect becomes very large after prolonged periods of incumbency: +0.010 after ten years and +0.014 after twenty years. This suggests that citizens recognize that governmental renewal becomes vital after a certain period.

Section 4 in the supplementary material includes a series of robustness tests. First, I replicate the regression by focusing on the surveys that ask respondents their country of birth, and on respondents who state that they were born in the country in which they are surveyed, to ensure that they were all effectively exposed to the electoral turnovers. Second, I restrict the sample by excluding the answers to the question about the perceived importance of democracy, which is slightly different in meaning. I focus on the surveys that ask the question about democracy *as the best form of government*, which is the most common indicator used to capture diffuse support for the regime. Third, I reproduce the analysis using an alternative dependent variable: support for strong leaders who do not have to bother with parliament and elections.⁵⁷ Fourth, I replace the control variable “proportion of years lived in a democracy” with one that takes the average quality of democracy that a respondent has experienced over their lifetime, using the scoring of V-Dem. Fifth, I add a control variable for education level, in three categories: no secondary degree, secondary degree, and degree in higher education. Sixth, I use alternative age thresholds to calculate exposure to electoral turnovers (or lack thereof): turning six years old or turning eighteen.⁵⁸ Seventh, I also reproduce the analysis by aggregating the independent and dependent variables at the country-year-survey level, which then become the average number of (non)turnovers experienced by survey respondents and their average support for democracy, and I estimate a two-way fixed-effects regression with country and year dummies. In all

⁵⁷ Claassen 2020a.

⁵⁸ For a threshold of turning six years old, see Acemoglu et al. 2025. For turning eighteen, see Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017.

these tests, the turnover effect remains unaffected (or even increases) and keeps its statistical significance at $p < 0.01$. The exception is the two-way fixed-effect model, where the turnover effect is only statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ —which is not surprising, given that the N equals 276 for this aggregated analysis.

Section 4 in the supplementary material also includes a placebo test in which I examine whether respondents' democratic support is affected by national electoral turnovers that happened before the respondents were born. To do this, I count the number of electoral turnovers in the ten years preceding their birth. The results show that the placebo effect is very small—and in fact, negative. However, the effect is three times smaller in absolute terms than it is in the main specification.

HETEROGENEOUS ANALYSIS

I conduct heterogeneity tests by reestimating the OLS regression presented above, decomposing the turnover variable based on individual-, country-, and election-level characteristics. Figure 5 presents the results of the heterogeneous analysis at the individual level. First, it shows that the turnover effect is remarkably stable across two sociodemographic characteristics, gender and generation, although the effect is slightly smaller for Millennials (+0.004).⁵⁹

Second, Figure 5 shows that the turnover effect increases with democratic experience, rising from +0.005 among those who spent less than half their lives in a democracy and reaching +0.008 among those who have spent their entire lives in one. The finding supports the theory that electoral turnovers act as informational shocks through which citizens learn about democracy and its benefits. Those with experience of authoritarian rule and regime change are likely to hold more informed views about democracy, and thus gain less from national turnovers in this respect.

Relatedly, Figure 5 also shows that the turnover effect increases with education, used here as a proxy for political sophistication, going from +0.006 (for respondents with no secondary degree) to +0.008 (for those with higher-education degrees). This provides additional support for the learning mechanism: to learn from electoral turnovers, citizens must be minimally aware of what is happening in their country and cognitively able to connect turnovers to the abstract functioning of democracy.

⁵⁹ Generations are defined as follows: those born before 1946 are part of the Silent Generation; Boomers were born between 1946 and 1965; Generation X (or Gen X) between 1966 and 1980; and Millennials from 1981 to 2001, for the purpose of this study.

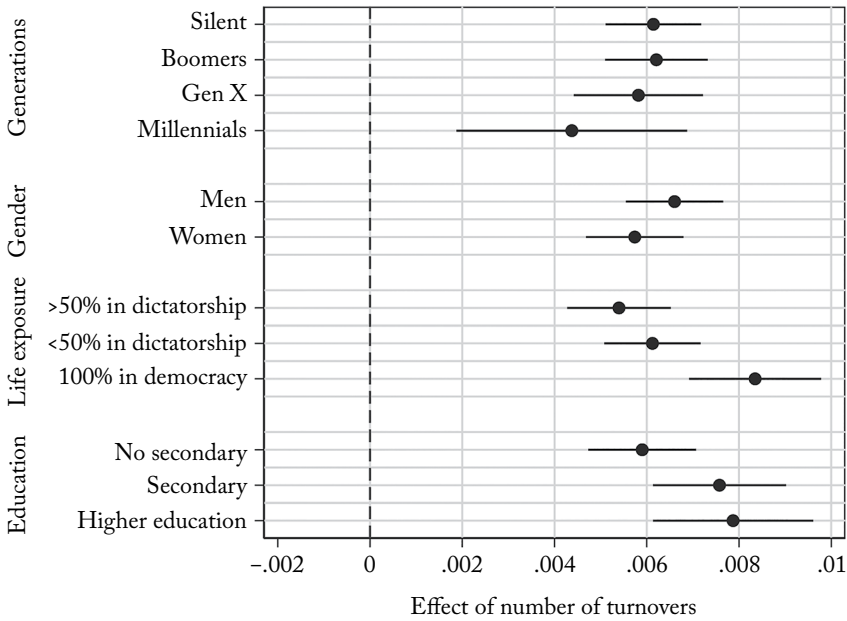


FIGURE 5
HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS (INDIVIDUAL LEVEL)^a

^a Dots represent coefficient estimates of OLS regressions predicting support for democracy (0–1), including all fixed effects as well as controls. In *generations*, I differentiate the turnover effect based on respondents' generation; in *gender*, based on their gender; in *life exposure*, based on the proportion of their life spent under democracy/dictatorship; in *education*, based on their educational level. Horizontal bars are 99 percent confidence intervals. Full regression results are shown in Section 6 of the supplementary material.

Section 6 of the supplementary material presents a similar pattern when using self-reported political interest, if available in the survey data, as a proxy for political sophistication—which tends to remain remarkably stable over time, though it could be affected by such political events as the occurrence of an electoral turnover.⁶⁰

Figure 6 presents the results of the heterogeneity analysis at the country level. Here, I differentiate the turnover effect based on the form of government (presidential or semipresidential versus parliamentary), the electoral system used in national elections (proportional versus nonproportional), the structure of the state (federal versus nonfederal), and the type of democracy (liberal or not). I retrieve all these variables from the V-Dem data set. First, Figure 6 reveals that the turnover effect

⁶⁰ Prior 2018.

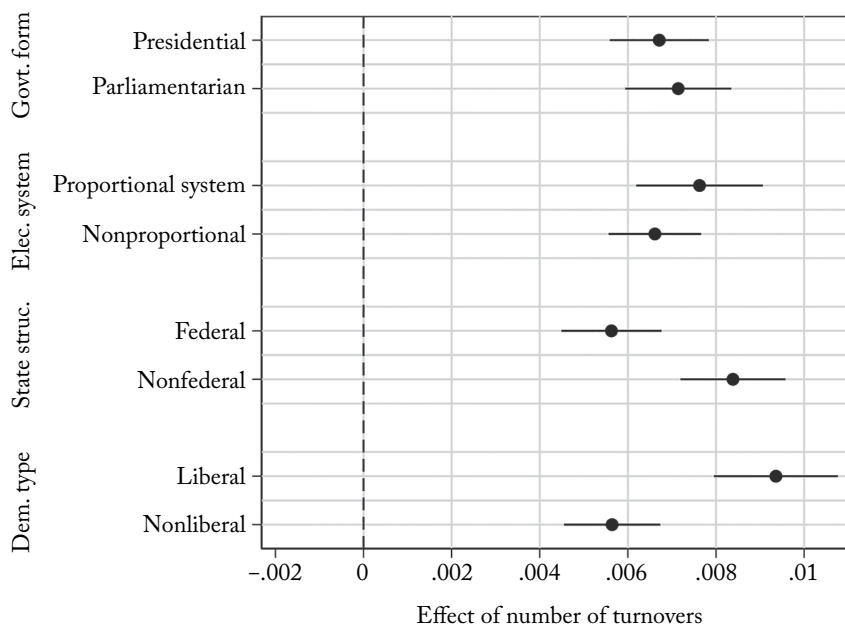


FIGURE 6
HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS (COUNTRY LEVEL)^a

^a Dots represent coefficient estimates of OLS regressions predicting support for democracy (0–1), including all fixed effects as well as controls. In *government form*, I differentiate the turnover effect based on whether the country is parliamentary or presidential; in *electoral system*, based on whether it uses a proportional or nonproportional system for national elections; in *state structure*, based on whether it is federal; and in *democracy type*, based on whether it is a liberal democracy or not. Horizontal bars are 99 percent confidence intervals. Full regression results are shown in Section 6 of the supplementary material.

is strong across all types of regimes. For example, little difference exists between parliamentary and presidential systems, or between proportional and nonproportional systems. This finding suggests that citizens in both consensual and majoritarian institutional arrangements share common preferences regarding what constitutes a good democracy—specifically, one with reasonably frequent partisan alternation.⁶¹ This result is somewhat unexpected, as one might have thought that political alternation would be more impactful in majoritarian countries, since it is embedded in the system's DNA.⁶²

Second, Figure 6 also shows that the turnover effect is larger in nonfederal countries (+0.008), which is perhaps unsurprising given that

⁶¹ Blais et al. 2023.

⁶² Lijphart 2012.

national governments and their leaders are more relevant in those systems. The turnover effect is larger in liberal democracies as well (+0.009), suggesting that citizens in these contexts particularly value political alternation. Taken together, the results indicate that the turnover effect is a general phenomenon across institutional settings, but is especially pronounced in countries in which national-level politics are most salient and democratic standards are more demanding.

Finally, Figure 7 shows the variation at the election level, using a range of variables from the V-Dem data set. First, I test whether national electoral turnovers resulting from elections with high voter turnouts have a larger effect than other turnovers do. This could be because direct participation in an election makes citizens feel more engaged in the process. I use the median value of voter turnout in the data set to group electoral turnovers. Figure 7 reveals that the turnover effect is indeed larger in the context of a high turnout rate (+0.008). However, and importantly, this effect is still positive when turnout is low (+0.004), indicating that exposure to national electoral turnovers remains a long-term determinant of downstream democratic support, even in less favorable circumstances.

Second, I examine the size of the winning party's support base. It has long been established that citizens' democratic attitudes increase when their preferred party wins the election.⁶³ However, we can argue that every election has a winner, even without a turnover, so the winner-loser gap in democratic attitudes should not affect the turnover effect. But if we assume the effect is asymmetrical, such that the boost in democratic support for winners is stronger when a turnover occurs, compared to when the incumbent wins, the winner-loser gap becomes a potential mechanism behind the turnover effect. To test this, I group the turnover effect by whether the winning party received more than the median vote share in the data set (that is, 43 percent), or less. The effect is greater when the winner's support base is slightly larger (+0.007 versus +0.005). This indicates that the positive effect of electoral turnovers on support for democracy is partially driven by the satisfaction boost that electoral winners experience following an alternation in power. However, Figure 7 also shows that the effect is positive even when the winner's support base is relatively small.

Third, I assess whether ideological polarization alters the magnitude of the turnover effect. It is reasonable to expect that turnovers resulting in the election of a head of government whose policies are radically

⁶³ Anderson and Guillory 1997; Blais and Gélneau 2007; Nadeau, Daoust, and Dassonneville 2023.

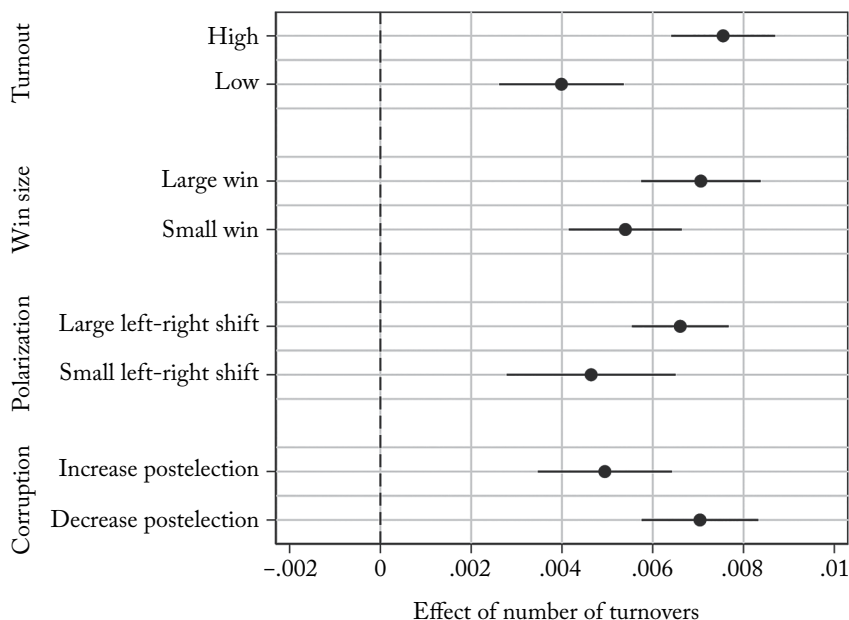


FIGURE 7
HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS (ELECTION LEVEL)^a

^a Dots represent coefficient estimates of OLS regressions predicting support for democracy (0–1), including all fixed effects as well as controls. In *turnout*, I differentiate the turnover effect based on whether voter turnout was higher than the median; in *win size*, based on whether the vote share of the winner was higher than the median; in *polarization*, based on whether the left-right shift between the previous and new head of government is higher than the median; and in *corruption*, based on whether the corruption level in the respondent's country increased or decreased in the year that followed the electoral turnover. Horizontal bars are 99 percent confidence intervals. Full regression results are shown in Section 6 of the supplementary material.

different from those of their predecessor would be perceived as more significant, especially by citizens who support the policies of the new head of government, thus having a stronger impact on their democratic attitudes. To examine this, I merge my data set with the V-Party data set, which provides estimates of the left-right positions of major parties based on expert surveys.⁶⁴ I assume the left-right political dimension to be a reliable indicator of the overall ideological space in which parties compete. I calculate the left-right shift between the party of the outgoing head of government and that of the incoming head, and use the median to group electoral turnovers. Figure 7 reveals that electoral turnovers leading to a large left-right shift have a larger effect than those

⁶⁴ Lührmann et al. 2020.

resulting in smaller shifts (+0.007 versus +0.005), suggesting that policy differences and preferences play a role in the turnover effect, and that citizens recognize the importance of meaningful changes.

Finally, I test whether the turnover effect is stronger when it leads to improvements in governance. Evidence shows that electoral turnovers indeed increase economic prosperity and reduce corruption, which could indirectly influence democratic support.⁶⁵ To explore this, I decompose the turnover variable based on whether it leads to an increase or decrease in corruption in the following year (measured via V-Dem). Figure 7 shows that although the turnover effect is slightly larger when corruption drops, it remains substantial even when corruption increases (+0.007 versus +0.005), which suggests that the indirect mechanism is not the only part of the story. Section 6 in the supplementary material shows a similar pattern when examining increases or decreases in GDP per capita in the year following the election.

CONCLUSION

In an era of growing concern over democratic backsliding, this article argues that electoral turnovers—defined as partisan changes in the head of the national government—are essential for sustaining long-term democratic support. Although such events are relatively rare, occurring only once every three elections, according to my data set covering seventy-nine countries since the year 1900, they provide critical learning opportunities. During these times, citizens witness the operation of democratic mechanisms, particularly the willingness of political elites to relinquish power following an electoral defeat. Thus, exposure to electoral turnovers should make citizens update their views about democracy and increase their support for it.

To test this hypothesis, I merge individual-level survey data from more than 350,000 respondents in seventy-nine countries, matched with a century's worth of electoral data. By exploiting the differences among cohorts within country-year-surveys, I estimate the effect of electoral turnovers. My analysis reveals a lasting and substantial turnover effect on citizens' democratic support. The heterogeneity analysis reveals that the turnover effect remains strong across political systems, such as proportional and majoritarian countries, although it is even larger in non-federal liberal democracies. Importantly, the effect is most pronounced

⁶⁵ On the effect of electoral turnovers on economic prosperity and corruption, see Marx, Pons, and Rollet 2025.

among respondents who have never experienced dictatorship, likely because they have more to learn about democracy than those who have lived through authoritarianism and regime change. Relatedly, the effect is also stronger among those with high levels of education and political interest, showing that following politics, at least minimally, is a requirement for being affected by the turnover effect.

These results bring important empirical contributions to the literature that seeks to understand what drives citizens' support for democracy. In particular, they show that exposure to electoral turnovers is crucial to fully appreciate the democratic experience. Second, my results also help to explain why many young people in democracies seem disillusioned with democratic principles.⁶⁶ This attitude could be due to life-cycle effects, in the sense that younger cohorts may not have experienced enough electoral turnovers to gain a proper understanding of how democracy functions.

My analysis further demonstrates that the turnover effect is more pronounced after prolonged periods of incumbency—that is, more than ten years, which is not uncommon. For example, Sweden's Social Democratic Party, Italy's Christian Democrats, Belgium's Christian Social Democrats, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party, India's National Congress, and the Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico all held the national government in their respective countries over multiple decades. Although democratic support in some of these countries may be higher, it could have been even higher with more frequent political alternation.

The 1999 election in Belgium vividly illustrates the core argument of this article. The Christian Social Democrats had maintained uninterrupted control of the prime minister's office from the end of World War II, but following a series of judicial scandals they were ousted by the Liberal Party led by Guy Verhofstadt, whose campaign focused on democratic renewal.⁶⁷ This electoral shift led to a profound transformation of Belgian democratic institutions. The new government, which for the first time included the Green Party, established a Committee for Democratic Renewal that involved many independent academic experts, and later implemented several institutional reforms, including the direct election of mayors.⁶⁸

We can also draw some normative implications from these findings. Classic political science scholars have argued in favor of governmental

⁶⁶ Norris 2017

⁶⁷ Frogner and Aish 2003.

⁶⁸ Pilet 2007.

stability for the sake of democracy, often citing the example of interwar Germany's citizens who, having wearied of their country's severe instability, were presumably willing to accept the Nazi takeover.⁶⁹ This study's findings suggest that citizens recognize the benefits for democracy of periodic political alternation. In this context, I recommend that constitution makers design institutions that ensure these periodic alternations, perhaps through term limits or by avoiding measures that excessively reinforce governmental stability. In today's Germany, for example, every parliamentary no-confidence vote against the government must be "constructive," requiring the proposal of an alternative chancellor. In France, the president can dissolve the National Assembly, and thus the government, only once per year. In sum, although governmental stability does have its merits, this article highlights the key role of electoral turnovers in invigorating democratic engagement, and suggests that a balance between stability and periodic political change is essential for the health and longevity of democratic systems.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary material for this article can be found at <http://muse.jhu.edu/resolve/350>.

DATA

Replication files for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/8L RGFL>.

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⁶⁹ Sartori 1994; Hermens 1941.

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democratic backsliding, democratization, citizens' democratic support, electoral turnover, cohort analysis, long-term legacies