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Are competent citizens critical democrats? Political resources and evaluations of democratic institutions

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how cognitive resources such as internal efficacy and political knowledge relate to citizens' ability to evaluate democratic institutions. Using original survey data from the United States ($N = 1093$), we find, first, that internal efficacy is associated with more positive assessments of democratic institutions in general. Conversely, political knowledge is associated with more discriminating assessments of specific institutions. Third, political knowledge moderates the positive impact of internal efficacy. Finally, while partisan and ideological reasoning are present in citizens' evaluations of democracy, greater political knowledge is associated with more nuanced assessments of democratic institutions across parties and ideological orientations. These results suggest that increasing cognitive resources can contribute to the development of critical citizens capable of identifying undemocratic features of their political systems.

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For most of the twentieth century, democratic backsliding took the form of a sudden collapse of the entire democratic system in the hands of a military coup or a revolutionary movement. Today, democratic erosion is more likely to be characterized by the gradual weakening of some democratic institutions while others remain intact (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This raises an important challenge for democratic consolidation. If democracy is to survive and improve, it requires vigilant and well-informed citizens that notice when political institutions do not meet democratic standards and mobilize to address them.

Unfortunately, previous research suggests that citizens may lack the cognitive competencies to identify and evaluate undemocratic features of their political systems. Several studies have argued that people are either too *disinformed* or *misinformed* to act as democratic watchdogs (Achen & Bartels, 2017; Carpini et al., 1996; Converse, 1990; Kuklinski et al., 2000). Even in advanced democracies, citizens are typically too uninterested in politics to form coherent political views (Berelson et al., 1954; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Furthermore, citizens often follow their partisan identities uncritically, even on issues in which their party positions clash with their "objective" interests (Gaines et al., 2007; Goodman, 2022; Kahan, 2013; Milton & Taber, 2013; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Taber & Lodge, 2006).

While these findings in the literature suggest that citizens may lack, on average, the cognitive resources to evaluate democratic performance, another line of research has noted the large variation in political sophistication across people (Arthur & McCubbins, 1998; Carpini et al., 1996; Lupia, 2016). Hence, there may be groups of citizens that are politically informed and capable of identifying, evaluating, and denouncing undemocratic institutions. This raises the

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question about how cognitive resources such as political knowledge —i.e., individuals' factual information about politics—and internal efficacy —i.e., people's subjective perceptions about their own understanding of politics—might enable citizens to be vigilant of undemocratic tendencies in their political systems.

This article examines how political knowledge and internal efficacy relate to citizens' evaluations of democracy in their country. We present the results from an original survey fielded on an online panel of respondents in the United States ($N = 1093$) in April 2022. The survey asked respondents to evaluate to what extent different institutions related to political equality, legal equality, and freedom of expression lived up to democratic principles in the country. For each of these aspects of democracy, we asked a question about how the democratic system performed overall and a question about specific practices and institutions. Our expectation is that evaluations of the latter, more specific questions, should require greater cognitive resources from respondents.

Our analyses indicate that political resources are associated with different evaluations of democratic institutions. On the one hand, internal efficacy is associated with a *rallying* pattern. Respondents with higher internal efficacy tended to consider more democratic all political institutions compared to respondents with lower internal efficacy. This rallying pattern is likely to be reflecting the fact that citizens who see themselves as efficacious political agents are more likely to be politically engaged and have a positive view of the political system (Gamson, 1968; Montero et al., 1997; Valentino et al., 2009). Conversely, less efficacious citizens are more likely to see democratic institutions as exclusionary and unintelligible (Emmenegger et al., 2015; Geissel, 2008; Marx & Nguyen, 2018).

On the other hand, political knowledge is associated with more *discriminating* assessments of democratic institutions. While we do not find differences between less and more knowledgeable respondents in their answers to general questions about the democratic system as a whole, we consistently find differences when it comes to questions about specific democratic institutions. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that political knowledge is associated with more nuanced and more precise evaluations of the performance of specific political institutions in various contexts (Karp et al., 2003; Naurin & Ekengren Oscarsson, 2017; Yeung, 2023).

We also find that political knowledge moderates the rallying effect of internal efficacy. As political knowledge increases, more efficacious respondents were more discriminating in their assessments of specific democratic institutions.

Finally, in line with other recent studies (Goodman, 2022; Graham & Svulik, 2020; Kingzette et al., 2021), we find that ideological and partisan reasoning are present in citizens' views about democratic performance. However, our results also support the claim that political resources are central to democratic citizenship, as they contribute to foster critical citizens that are better able to develop nuanced assessments of the democratic system.

These findings have important theoretical and political implications. They suggest that partisan and ideological reasoning do not necessarily hinder citizens' ability to act as watchdogs of democracy, as long as these forms of motivated reasoning come with other political resources that help citizens identify and be critical of political institutions that hinder their democratic rights.

1. Political resources and democratic evaluations

Concerns about democratic backsliding have sparked a renewed interest in democratic attitudes. Numerous studies have revisited the literature on the drivers of support for and satisfaction with democracy in recent years (Christopher & Magalhães, 2021; Claassen, 2020; Dahlberg et al., 2015; Foa & Mounk, 2016; Magalhães, 2016; Nadeau et al., 2021). Similarly, there is now a robust literature on how citizens understand democracy (Canache, 2012; Davis et al., 2022; Ferrin & Kriesi, 2016); to what extent these understandings reflect preferences for certain models of democracy (e.g., liberal, deliberative, participatory, etc.) (Dalton et al., 2007; Heyne, 2019; Rapeli & von Schoultz, 2021; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007); whether members of certain social groups are more likely to emphasize the importance of particular democratic practices and institutions (Goenaga, 2022; Hansen & Goenaga, 2021;

Werner et al., 2020); and how citizens evaluate specific democratic institutions in their countries (Carey et al., 2019; Ferrin & Kriesi, 2016).

One of the distinctive features of this literature is the effort to gain a better grasp of citizens' views about specific norms, practices, and institutions. This very much mirrors a historical context in which democratic backsliding no longer takes the form of overnight regime change, but rather occurs gradually, through the incremental erosion of specific parts of the democratic system (Bermeo, 2016; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). In the face of such a pattern of piecemeal democratic backsliding, understanding citizens' views about those undemocratic features of the political system becomes of utmost importance for democratic survival and consolidation.

However, evaluations of specific democratic institutions can demand significant cognitive resources from citizens (Goenaga & Hansen, 2022). Such evaluations require citizens to have coherent expectations about how democratic institutions should operate, to be informed about the workings of often technically complex aspects of the political system, and to reflect on whether there is a gap between the two (Berinsky, 2004, p. 10). This raises the question about whether citizens have the cognitive resources necessary to act as watchdogs of democracy.

Several influential studies suggest that this is unlikely to be the case (Achen & Bartels, 2017; Carpini et al., 1996; Converse, 1990; Kuklinski et al., 2000). Citizens tend to be uninformed about public affairs (Carpini et al., 1996; Converse, 1990; Galston, 2001) and are happy to delegate political decision-making to experts and political elites (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002, although see; Rapeli, 2016; VanderMolen, 2017 for evidence challenging these findings). Furthermore, citizens are prone to cognitive biases, such as partisan motivated reasoning, that lead to misperceptions about politics (Gaines et al., 2007; Kahan, 2013; Kuklinski et al., 2000; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Taber & Lodge, 2006). From this perspective, citizens judge whether specific institutions meet democratic standards based on the extent to which they benefit their partisan or ideological interests (Graham & Svobik, 2020; Kingzette et al., 2021; Krishnarajan, 2022).

However, even if, on average, citizens tend to be uninterested, uninformed, or misinformed about politics, differences in political resources, such as political knowledge and internal efficacy, could still matter for the development of nuanced assessments of democratic institutions. Several studies have documented persistent differences in political knowledge—i.e., “the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory” (Carpini et al., 1996, p. 10)—across the population, with politically marginalized groups being more likely to show lower levels of knowledge (Dow, 2009; Fortin-Rittberger, 2016; Fraile, 2014; Fraile & Gomez, 2017; Jerit & Barabas, 2017; Kenski, 2000; Miller, 2019; Sanbonmatsu, 2003; Wolak & McDevitt, 2011).

More knowledgeable citizens tend to participate at higher rates in politics (Ihme & Tausendpfund, 2018; Ondercin & Jones-White, 2011). More politically knowledgeable citizens are also more likely to vote “correctly,” that is, to link their policy preferences to their vote choices (Colombo, 2018; Gomez & Matthew Wilson, 2001; Lau & Redlawsk, 1997; Lau et al., 2008, 2014; Rapeli, 2018), and they are better able to correctly assess whether political parties fulfilled their election pledges (Naurin & Ekengren Oscarsson, 2017). Similarly, citizens who know more about politics are more likely to develop nuanced and precise assessments of political institutions. Specifically in relation to democratic performance, Karp et al. (2003) show that views about democracy in the European Union (EU) among those with lower levels of knowledge tend to be driven by their views about national institutions. Instead, more knowledgeable Europeans are more likely to base their views about the EU on the performance of EU institutions themselves. More recently, Yeung (2023) shows that more educated citizens—a strong predictor of political knowledge—are less likely to overestimate the level of democracy in nondemocracies.

On the other hand, internal efficacy refers to people's subjective perceptions about their own understanding of politics (Craig & Maggionto, 1982; Gidengil et al., 2008; Niemi et al., 1991; Wolak, 2018). As in the case of political knowledge, previous research finds substantial differences in internal efficacy across social groups, with women and minorities showing lower values (Fraile & de Miguel

Moyer, 2021; Gidengil et al., 2008; Thomas, 2012). These differences tend to be associated with processes of political socialization both in the family and in the political context during adulthood (Beaumont, 2011; Fraile & de Miguel Moyer, 2021; Schneider et al., 2016; Wolak, 2018, 2020). For instance, feelings of internal efficacy tend to be higher in contexts where people have more opportunities for voice in politics (Wolak, 2018, p. 781), and they tend to be lower among the unemployed (Marx & Nguyen, 2016).

Internal efficacy is associated with higher rates of political participation, but it is also enhanced by successful engagement in politics (Gamson, 1968; Montero et al., 1997; Valentino et al., 2009). As a result, internal efficacy tends to produce feedback loops in which citizens with higher internal efficacy participate more in politics, which in turn feeds their sense of internal efficacy, while citizens with lower levels of internal efficacy are more likely to withdraw from the political system altogether (Emmenegger et al., 2015; Geissel, 2008; Marx & Nguyen, 2018).

In the next section, we derive from these literatures three hypotheses about how political resources might affect citizens' evaluations of democratic institutions.

2. Hypotheses

First, we expect citizens that are more involved in politics to develop different views about democratic performance compared to those who feel alienated from the political system. In particular, we expect citizens who believe that they have a good understanding of politics (i.e., those with higher levels of internal efficacy) to be more likely to see overall political institutions in their country as democratic. The very fact that they believe that they understand the political system is likely to make them think that political institutions live up to democratic principles. Indeed, as pointed out by literature discussed above, citizens who see themselves as efficacious political agents are more likely to be politically engaged and to have had positive experiences of political participation. Conversely, less efficacious citizens are more likely to feel confused by and excluded from politics. Lower values in internal efficacy may thus reflect an underlying political disaffection that would be associated with more negative views of democratic institutions in general. Therefore, we expect internal efficacy to be associated with a *rallying* effect in which, all else equal, more efficacious citizens tend to report more positive evaluations of democratic institutions. Hence:

Hypothesis 1. Citizens with higher levels of internal efficacy are more likely to express positive evaluations of democratic institutions (*rallying* effect).

Second, all else equal, higher political knowledge should enable citizens to develop more nuanced assessments of the democratic system. This would mean that more knowledgeable citizens should be more likely to recognize undemocratic features of specific parts of the political system and to provide more negative assessments when asked specifically about those institutions. Consequently, we expect political knowledge to be associated with a *discriminating* effect, in which more knowledgeable individuals are more likely to report different assessments depending on whether they are asked to evaluate general features of the political system or the democratic performance of very specific political institutions. Thus:

Hypothesis 2. Differences in political knowledge should be associated with different evaluations of specific democratic institutions (*discriminating* effect).

According to Hypotheses 1 and 2, internal efficacy and political knowledge would pull people's assessments of democratic institutions in different directions, with political knowledge making citizens more discriminating and internal efficacy making them less discriminating. Therefore, we expect the rallying effect of internal efficacy to be attenuated among more

knowledgeable citizens and to be more pronounced among less knowledgeable respondents. This also means that the discriminating effect of political knowledge should be more likely to occur among citizens that also enjoy high levels of internal efficacy. The disaffection associated with low levels of efficacy should inhibit the discriminating effect of political knowledge, as it should spark more negative assessments of democratic institutions across the board. Consequently:

Hypothesis 3. Political knowledge should moderate the relationship between internal efficacy and more positive evaluations of democratic institutions.

3. Data

To examine these hypotheses, we carried out an original survey that asked respondents to evaluate six different features of American democracy, along with questions about their age, gender, race, education, household income, partisan identity, political ideology, internal efficacy, and political knowledge. The survey was implemented on a panel of residents of the United States using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) on 7 April 2022.

Several studies show that MTurk samples perform similarly as national probability samples for various tasks and measures, including those related to political knowledge and ideology (Berinsky et al., 2012; Casler et al., 2013; Clifford et al., 2015; Farjam & Loxbo, 2023; Hauser & Schwarz, 2016; Nai & Maier, 2021; Samayoa et al., 2021). Moreover, previous research also argues that the data from MTurk surveys can be reliable as long as researchers are aware of the composition of the sample and reflect on how it may affect their results (Armaly & Lane, 2023; Gans-Morse & Nichter, 2021; Hayes & Guay, 2022; Kennedy et al., 2020; Kraft et al., 2022; Levay et al., 2016; McBrayer et al., 2022; Michael et al., 2011). Since we are primarily interested in the relationship between our predictors (internal efficacy and political knowledge) and citizens' evaluations of democracy, rather than in the distribution of these traits in the population, we are convinced that the data is appropriate for the purposes of this study.

In total, 1093 participants completed the survey. We required participants to have a "Master" qualification on MTurk to ensure quality of the responses. We also embedded an attention check in the survey and excluded participants that failed this check. The sample contains slightly more men and Democrats than does the population of the United States, and it mirrors the population for all the other variables used in the analysis. We apply post-stratification weights in all our analyses to account for the fact that Democrats and men were oversampled. This step is a useful tool to ensure that the overall sample is more representative of the population, although all our results hold when running the models without post-stratification weights. Descriptive statistics are reported in Appendices A and B. On average, respondents took 6 minutes and 15 seconds to complete the survey, with values ranging from approximately 3.5 minutes to just over 11 minutes.

For our dependent variables, we asked respondents to rate to what extent they believed that various parts of the American political system lived up to key democratic principles. Respondents were given the following prompt:

We would like to ask you a few questions evaluating democracy in the country. To what extent do you think each of these statements applies to the U.S. today? (0 = not at all to 10 = a great degree). If you are not confident in your answer, please indicate "don't know."

All respondents rated six statements that referred to three general principles of liberal democracy: political equality, legal equality, and freedom of expression. For some of these questions, we drew on the formulations used by the Bright Line Watch Project (Carey et al., 2019). For each of these aspects of democracy, we asked a more general question about how the political system performed overall regarding each of these three principles of liberal democracy, as well as a more specific question about

Table 1. Evaluative questions about democracy.

Democratic aspect	General question	Mean	Specific question	Mean
Political equality	Everyone's vote counts the same.	6.308 (2.469)	The geographic boundaries of electoral districts do not systematically advantage any particular group.	5.543 (2.566)
Legal equality	The law is enforced equally for all persons.	6.007 (2.634)	The courts do not systematically disadvantage certain racial groups in sentencing.	5.671 (2.600)
Freedom of expression	Everyone is able to express their views even if they are unpopular.	6.338 (2.398)	All speech is protected, even fighting words that elicit violence.	6.072 (2.447)

Standard deviation provided in parentheses.

concrete institutions related to those principles.¹ If political knowledge enables people to produce more nuanced assessments of democracy, we should observe greater differences between more and less knowledgeable respondents when it comes to the more specific questions. [Table 1](#) presents the six statements and the mean value of respondents' evaluations.

Moreover, experts had voiced concerns at the time of the survey about the democratic shortcomings of the three specific institutions included in the questionnaire. Several studies have shown that the geographic boundaries of electoral districts advantage particular groups (e.g., [Grofman, 2022](#); [Helmke et al., 2022](#); [Stephanopoulos & Warshaw, 2020](#)). Similarly, there is extensive evidence that courts systematically disadvantage racial minorities in sentencing (e.g., [Nellis, 2021](#); [Omori & Johnson, 2019](#)). Finally, when it comes to the third specific question (fighting words are protected), there is little evidence that there has been an erosion in freedom of expression. If anything, the grounds for restrictions on fighting words have become narrower over time ([Calvert, 2022](#); [Strasser, 2020](#); [White, 2019](#)). There is more disagreement, however, about whether these developments are positive or negative for democracy. Hence, in line with Hypothesis 1, if political knowledge helps citizens provide more nuanced evaluations of democratic institutions, we not only expect to find greater differences between more and less knowledgeable citizens in their assessments of these three specific questions, but we also expect more knowledgeable citizens to be more critical of these institutions, especially for the questions related to districting and sentencing.

To measure internal efficacy, we asked respondents to evaluate on a scale from 0 to 10 how confident they were that they understood the important political issues facing the country. The mean score for internal efficacy was 6.94, with few respondents reporting very low values. This or similar indicators are commonly used in the literature to measure internal efficacy (e.g., [Geissel, 2008](#); [Wolak, 2018](#)).

To measure political knowledge, we produced an index based on a factor score of whether respondents answered correctly three factual questions about US politics. By using factor analysis instead of the sum of correct answers, the contribution of each factual question to the knowledge index is weighted based on the factor loadings. Previous research shows that differences in political knowledge are sensitive to the measurement instruments used ([Dolan, 2011](#); [Ferrin et al., 2018](#); [Jerit & Barabas, 2017](#); [Kathleen & Hansen, 2020](#); [Kraft et al., 2022](#); [Lizotte & Sidman, 2009](#); [Mondak & Anderson, 2004](#); [Prior, 2014](#)). To address this, [Kraft and Dolan \(2022\)](#) recommend including questions that are relevant for the political context under investigation, that cover current political events ([Barabas et al., 2014](#)), and that speak to issues that are directly relevant to different groups ([Carpini et al., 1996](#)). Following this advice, we produced a battery of three factual questions about US politics related to (1) static institutional aspects connected to electoral rules; (2) racial minorities' representation at the highest level of the judiciary; and (3) a policy initiative that was very actively discussed in the media at the time. We did not allow respondents to answer "don't know" in these questions to reduce biases resulting from systematic differences in the propensity to guess ([Ferrin et al., 2018](#); [Mondak & Anderson, 2004](#)). [Table 2](#) presents the questions and the distribution of correct answers for

¹An exploratory factor analysis with a two-dimensional estimation indicates that the questions align with the groupings described above. This finding remains consistent across various statistical rotation methods.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics - political knowledge.

Question	Answer	Correct
Number of years for a U.S. Senator's term?	6 years	58.01%
Name of Biden's Supreme Court nominee?	Ketanji Brown Jackson	83.24%
Policy not extended after failure of Build Back Better?	Child Tax Credit	48.82%

each question. 127 respondents answered all three questions incorrectly, 236 respondents answered correctly one question, 354 answered correctly two questions, and 381 answered correctly all questions.

All the models control for age, gender, race, education, income, partisanship, and political ideology. We recode our race variable into two categories (white and non-white), since we have few observations for some racial groups. For gender, two respondents identified as non-binary or third gender and two declined to answer. These individuals were excluded from the analysis, since there were too few observations to calculate a reliable coefficient. To measure partisanship, we asked respondents to report the strength of their attachment to a political party based on a seven-level scale: (1) Strong Republican, (2) Moderate Republican, (3) Leans Republican, (4) Independent, (5) Leans Democrat, (6) Moderate Democrat, and (7) Strong Democrat. We then generated a categorical variable for Republicans (leaners, moderate and strong Republicans), Independents, and Democrats (leaners, moderates, and strong Democrats). Our sample contained 53.93% Democrats, 32.79% Republicans, and 13.30% Independents. We applied post-stratification weights to account for oversampling of Democrats.

To measure political ideology, we followed the standard approach in the literature, asking respondents to place their political views on a scale from 0 (very liberal) to 10 (very conservative). The sample was skewed towards conservatives, with a mean value of 5.88.

We include both partisanship and political ideology in our main models, since they capture different attributes. Indeed, these two variables are weakly correlated in our sample (0.2). However, we run additional models where we include only one of them at a time and discuss these different specifications below when presenting our results.

4. Results

Table 3 presents the results of a series of OLS regressions with respondents' evaluations of democratic institutions as the dependent variables.² The independent variables of interest are political knowledge and internal efficacy. All the models control for age, gender, race, education, income, partisanship and ideology, and include post-stratification weights.

In line with Hypothesis 1, internal efficacy is associated with more positive evaluations for all six of the evaluative questions. The coefficients for efficacy are statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level in all the models, and they are quite large in magnitude. For the more general questions (Models 1 to 3), respondents reporting the maximum score in internal efficacy (10) tend to provide evaluations that are over one full point higher (again, in a scale from 0 to 10) than respondents with the mean level of internal efficacy in our sample (6.94).

Similarly, the coefficients for political knowledge are consistent with Hypothesis 2. Whereas we do not find statistically significant differences between less and more knowledgeable respondents in the general questions (Models 1 to 3), we find systematic differences in the questions about specific democratic institutions (Models 4 to 6). More knowledgeable respondents tended to provide more negative evaluations for the three questions about districting, sentencing, and protections for fighting words. These effects were statistically significant and substantively important. Respondents that answered correctly all three knowledge questions tended to provide assessments of these three

²Alternative models using a gamma distribution to account for potential non-normality in the dependent variables yield substantively similar results.

Table 3. Models predicting evaluations of democratic institutions.

	Vote Counts Same	Law Enforced Equally	Express Unpopular Views	Districts Advantage Parties	Courts Sentencing Disparity	Fighting Words Protected
Constant	2.741*** (0.574)	1.454* (0.565)	3.528*** (0.534)	0.415 (0.552)	1.204* (0.545)	1.899*** (0.541)
Age	0.014* (0.007)	0.010 (0.007)	0.010 (0.006)	0.003 (0.007)	0.006 (0.007)	0.010 (0.006)
Woman	0.103 (0.150)	0.254 (0.159)	0.178 (0.152)	0.293 (0.153)	0.284 (0.158)	0.272 (0.152)
White	-0.291 (0.203)	-0.249 (0.205)	-0.300 (0.193)	-0.208 (0.206)	-0.143 (0.210)	-0.278 (0.193)
Education	-0.050 (0.102)	0.217* (0.097)	0.018 (0.090)	0.401*** (0.103)	0.229* (0.097)	0.153 (0.095)
Income	0.027 (0.029)	0.019 (0.031)	0.005 (0.030)	0.043 (0.031)	0.044 (0.031)	0.048 (0.030)
Party ID—Independent	-0.110 (0.265)	-0.160 (0.267)	-0.147 (0.238)	0.125 (0.252)	0.491* (0.239)	0.264 (0.225)
Party ID—Republican	0.233 (0.156)	0.217 (0.165)	0.136 (0.162)	0.188 (0.162)	0.388* (0.167)	0.046 (0.161)
Political Ideology	0.068* (0.026)	0.164*** (0.030)	0.056* (0.027)	0.178*** (0.030)	0.216*** (0.031)	0.143*** (0.028)
Political Efficacy	0.399*** (0.045)	0.326*** (0.046)	0.307*** (0.046)	0.293*** (0.045)	0.227*** (0.046)	0.301*** (0.044)
Political Knowledge	0.001 (0.076)	-0.095 (0.077)	-0.083 (0.073)	-0.360*** (0.079)	-0.211** (0.075)	-0.264*** (0.075)
Observations	1,045	1,058	1,052	1,019	1,036	1,035
R ²	0.122	0.141	0.082	0.174	0.144	0.133
Adjusted R ²	0.114	0.133	0.074	0.166	0.136	0.125

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

democratic institutions that were up to one full point lower than those offered by respondents that answered all knowledge questions incorrectly. These results are consistent with the theoretical expectations derived from Hypothesis 2, as they show that evaluations of specific aspects of the political system are more likely to be shaped by differences in political knowledge. Furthermore, more knowledgeable citizens are not only more likely to produce *more discriminating* evaluations of specific democratic institutions, but they also offer *more negative* assessments of those institutions.

Among the control variables, only political ideology shows positive, large and significant coefficients for all six questions. Respondents who placed themselves at the far-right of the ideological spectrum tended to provide evaluations that were up to two full points (in a scale from 0 to 10) higher than those offered by respondents who placed themselves at the far-left (see, for example, Model 5). In Appendix C we report the output of additional analyses in which we control for partisanship but not political ideology to account for potential collider biases. While the coefficients for political knowledge and internal efficacy remain the same, we find that Republicans tend to provide more positive evaluations of electoral and legal equality than Democrats (in both the general and specific questions), but not for the questions related to freedom of speech.

In Appendix D, we present models exploring the interaction of partisanship and ideology and political resources. Those results indicate that the rallying effect of internal efficacy is present among respondents across the ideological spectrum and for supporters of all parties, but it is especially pronounced among Republicans and conservatives. Interestingly, the rallying effect of internal efficacy for Democrats and liberals is much weaker when it comes to the questions about districting and sentencing disparities, which tend to be biased against these groups. These results suggest that, while internal efficacy is associated with more positive assessments in general, these effects may be moderated by partisan and ideological interests.

Similarly, additional analyses also reported in Appendix D confirm that political knowledge matters for questions about specific institutions, but not for the more general questions. However, when we look separately at the effects of knowledge by party and ideology, we

Table 4. Models predicting evaluations of democratic institutions – interactions.

	Vote Counts Same	Law Enforced Equally	Express Unpopular Views	Districts Advantage Parties	Courts Sentencing Disparity	Fighting Words Protected
Constant	2.801*** (0.578)	1.604** (0.570)	3.671*** (0.535)	0.533 (0.559)	1.337* (0.552)	1.998*** (0.549)
Age	0.014* (0.007)	0.010 (0.007)	0.010 (0.006)	0.004 (0.007)	0.006 (0.007)	0.010 (0.006)
Woman	0.102 (0.150)	0.251 (0.158)	0.176 (0.151)	0.287 (0.153)	0.278 (0.157)	0.271 (0.152)
White	-0.307 (0.203)	-0.284 (0.205)	-0.335 (0.193)	-0.236 (0.207)	-0.174 (0.211)	-0.304 (0.193)
Education	-0.054 (0.102)	0.208* (0.096)	0.009 (0.089)	0.392*** (0.103)	0.220* (0.097)	0.147 (0.096)
Income	0.026 (0.029)	0.018 (0.031)	0.004 (0.030)	0.043 (0.031)	0.044 (0.031)	0.047 (0.030)
Party ID - Independent	-0.098 (0.264)	-0.134 (0.266)	-0.128 (0.237)	0.144 (0.250)	0.509* (0.238)	0.283 (0.224)
Party ID - Republican	0.254 (0.156)	0.262 (0.163)	0.179 (0.160)	0.228 (0.161)	0.433** (0.167)	0.080 (0.160)
Political Ideology	0.065* (0.026)	0.159*** (0.030)	0.050 (0.027)	0.173*** (0.030)	0.210*** (0.031)	0.138*** (0.028)
Political Efficacy	0.397*** (0.045)	0.321*** (0.046)	0.302*** (0.046)	0.291*** (0.045)	0.222*** (0.046)	0.297*** (0.044)
Political Knowledge	0.328 (0.295)	0.636* (0.311)	0.616* (0.305)	0.295 (0.309)	0.493 (0.318)	0.259 (0.298)
Efficacy:Knowledge	-0.047 (0.040)	-0.105* (0.043)	-0.101* (0.042)	-0.095* (0.044)	-0.102* (0.044)	-0.075 (0.042)
Observations	1,045	1,058	1,052	1,019	1,036	1,035
R ²	0.124	0.147	0.087	0.179	0.151	0.137
Adjusted R ²	0.114	0.138	0.077	0.170	0.142	0.127

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

find some heterogeneity. Independents tend to provide more negative evaluations for all democratic institutions as political knowledge increases. Amongst Democrats, we find that political knowledge is specifically associated with more negative evaluations of the questions about districting and sentencing. Conversely, we do not find that political knowledge affects as much Republicans' assessments. It seems instead associated with slightly more positive views about legal equality and sentencing. Again, while these results are consistent with the claim that political knowledge is associated with more nuanced evaluations of specific democratic institutions, they indicate these effects are moderated to some extent by partisanship and ideology.

We now turn to examine Hypothesis 3, which expects the discriminating effects of political knowledge to attenuate the rallying effects of internal efficacy on citizens' evaluations of democratic institutions. The models in Table 4 reproduce the same specifications as those in Table 3, but now include an interaction term of political knowledge and internal efficacy. The negative and statistically significant coefficients (at the $p < .05$ level) for the interaction term in four of the six models indicate that the effects of internal efficacy on citizens' evaluations of democratic institutions tend to be weaker at higher levels of political knowledge.

These results are clearer when plotting the predicted evaluations for each of these questions at different levels of internal efficacy and political knowledge. As illustrated in Figure 1, at low levels of political knowledge the rallying effect of internal efficacy is present across all questions. However, this rallying effect becomes weaker as political knowledge increases. These results suggest that more competent citizens are indeed more likely to be critical democrats. Reasoned and discriminating evaluations of democratic institutions require high levels of both political knowledge and efficacy. In the absence of political knowledge, the rallying effect of internal efficacy leads to less nuanced

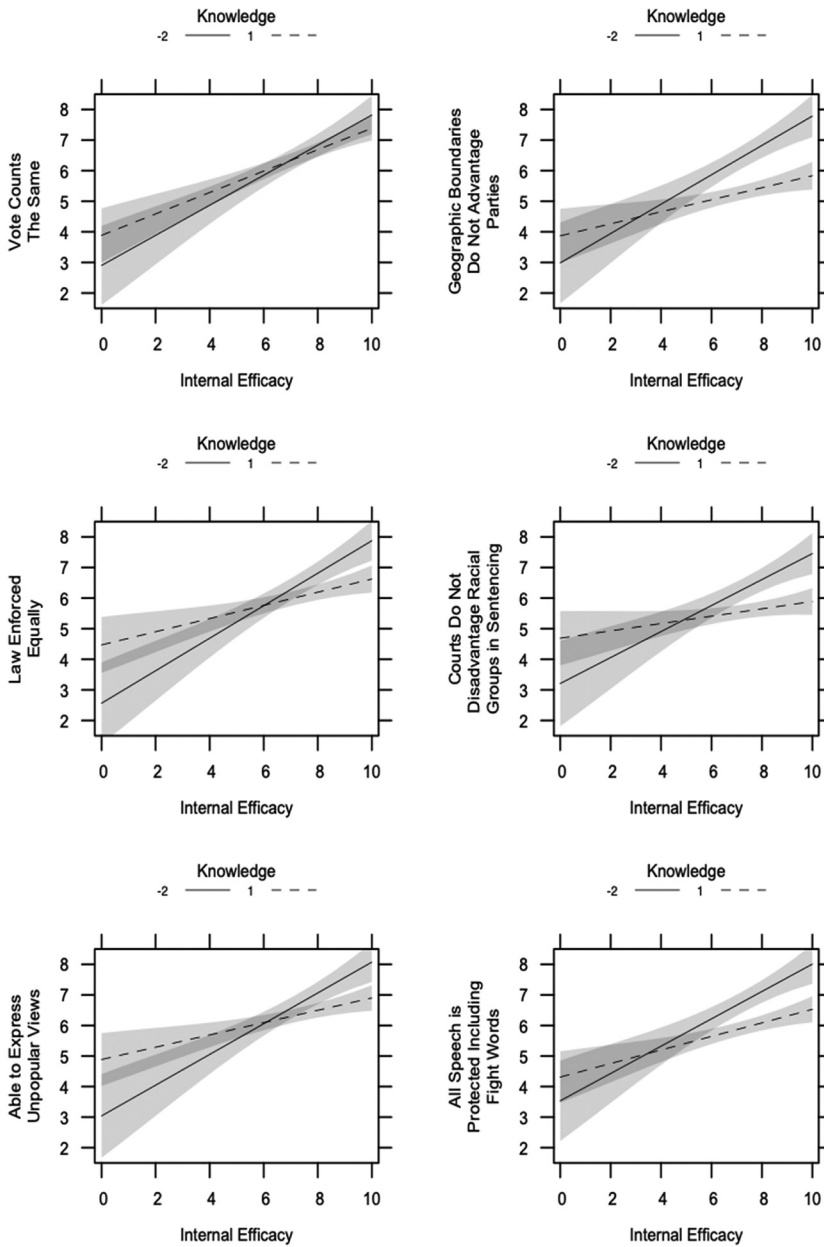


Figure 1. Predicted values of evaluations of democracy at different levels of political knowledge and internal efficacy.

evaluations of democracy, while in the absence of internal efficacy citizens tend to provide more negative assessments for all evaluative questions regardless of their level of political knowledge.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Democracy requires citizens that are committed to democratic principles and that demand political institutions to live up to those standards. To do so, such a citizenry must have the cognitive resources necessary to notice undemocratic features in their political system. This article has analyzed how

political knowledge and internal efficacy relate to citizens' assessments of democratic institutions in their country.

Our findings indicate, first, that internal efficacy tends to magnify positive assessments of democratic institutions. Second, political knowledge is associated with more nuanced assessments of democracy. More knowledgeable citizens tend to provide more negative assessments specifically for those institutions that present important democratic shortcomings according to experts. Third, the discriminating effect of political knowledge is only present at high levels of internal efficacy. These findings indicate that, while citizens on average may not have the political resources necessary to judge undemocratic trends in specific parts of the political system, those citizens who do possess higher levels of political knowledge and internal efficacy are capable of providing more nuanced evaluations of the performance of specific democratic institutions.

Furthermore, in line with recent studies on support for democratic norms (Goodman, 2022; Graham & Svobik, 2020; Kingzette et al., 2021) and with the vast literature on partisan motivated reasoning (Gaines et al., 2007; Goodman, 2022; Kahan, 2013; Milton & Taber, 2013; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Taber & Lodge, 2006), our analyses also show that partisanship and ideology play a role in shaping democratic evaluations. However, political resources tend to be associated with more nuanced evaluations of democracy among partisans from both sides of the political spectrum. This finding opens interesting avenues for further research, which may develop survey instruments specifically designed to assess how citizens evaluate undemocratic trends that disproportionately affect the interests of certain parties or ideologies. To the extent that more knowledgeable and efficacious partisans are better able to identify specific instances of democratic erosion that disproportionately affect them, political resources and partisan motivated reasoning may compound to enable citizens to remain vigilant of democracy.

While a limitation of this study is that our results are based on a snapshot of a single point in time, we provide robust evidence that different political resources are associated with different assessments of democratic institutions. These findings are consistent with previous studies that show that political knowledge is associated with more discriminating evaluations of political institutions in other contexts (Karp et al., 2003; Naurin & Ekengren Oscarsson, 2017; Yeung, 2023). Future research may extend our focus on citizens' ability to evaluate specific democratic institutions in other political systems and over time. Moreover, panel surveys capable of tracking within-individual changes in political resources could provide evidence of the causal impact of improvements in political knowledge and internal efficacy on citizens' views about the quality of democracy in their country.

Our main claim in this article has been that political resources contribute to the development of critical citizens. It thus provides grounds for guarded optimism. While partisanship can make those who benefit from undemocratic features of the political system less likely to see them as a problem for democracy, it can also make those negatively affected by those undemocratic features more likely to notice and be critical of them. The adversarial logic of liberal democracy can thus make people's self-interest push back against undemocratic tendencies, but only if citizens also have the political resources to do so.

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Ethics approval

The survey questionnaire received ethics approval from UW-Parkside's Institutional Review Board.

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