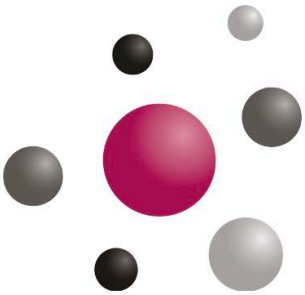

Global Trends and Expert Perceptions: Pessimism and the Assessment of Democratic Backsliding

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Global Trends and Expert Perceptions: Pessimism and the Assessment of Democratic Backsliding*

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*First and second authors listed alphabetically. We thank the V–Dem experts who volunteered their time to complete this survey. We also thank Linnea Fox, Staffan Lindberg, Natalia Natsika, and Steven Wilson for facilitating our access and interpretation of the data, and Michael Alvarez for his comments on an earlier draft of the paper. Finally, we thank Layla Pilon for research assistance, and Andrew Little and Anne Meng for their comments on our research design. Previous draft presented at the Demscore Conference 2024. Carl Henrik Knutsen's work on this project was supported by a grant from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no. 863486).

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Abstract

There are longstanding concerns about biases in expert-coded data. Here we attempt to causally identify the effect of these biases, specifically evaluating the claim that pessimism about global democracy affects expert coding of democracy locally in specific countries. Observational analyses of data from an original survey of experts demonstrate that perceptions of global and local democratic trends are indeed correlated. However, an embedded experiment yields no evidence of a causal effect of perceptions of global democracy trends on perceptions of local trends. Moreover, we find little evidence that pessimism about global trends substantially affects actual coding behavior with regard to specific countries. Together, these results alleviate some concerns about expert biases both in widely-used measures of democracy and more broadly.

A large body of social-scientific research relies on survey data provided by experts. However, a growing literature raises concerns that expert biases could affect findings based on this research (Bush and Platas 2025; Weidmann 2024; McMann et al. 2022; Schedler 2012). This discussion intersects with another debate in political science: how to measure trends in democracy worldwide. Researchers have questioned the degree to which widely perceived global democratic decline, or "backsliding," in recent years (e.g. Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Nord et al. 2025) is merely an artifact of biases in expert-coded measures. In particular, Little and Meng (2024) argue that pessimism about global democracy causes experts to systematically downgrade their evaluations of democracy locally (i.e., in their country of expertise), resulting in greatly inflated estimates of global democratic backsliding.

In this note, we discuss preregistered analyses of survey data from 334 experts who code for the Varieties of Democracy (V–Dem) Project, a prominent expert-coding enterprise that measures democracy over time and across countries. We do so to explore the scope and effects of global pessimism bias in expert-coded data, and thereby inform discussions about the extent of global democratic backsliding. In addition to correlational analyses of the relationship between an expert's perceptions of global trends and trends in their main country of expertise ("local" trends), we randomly assigned half of the experts to receive a question about global democracy trends before questions about democracy locally. This experiment allows us to causally assess the effect of global perceptions on perceptions of local trends.

Although we find a clear correlation between perceptions of local and global trends, the experiment yields little evidence that global perceptions causally affect perceptions of local trends. Additional observational analyses reveal that expert perceptions of local trends have a much stronger relationship with an expert's actual V–Dem coding of specific countries than do global perceptions, indicating that experts weight local information more than global perceptions when coding their countries of expertise.

Our findings indicate that it is unlikely that global pessimism bias drives expert-based measures of worldwide democratic backsliding. More broadly, they highlight that claims regarding the influence of cognitive biases in expert coding may be overwrought. Especially given the absence of reasonable alternatives for expert-coded data in many crucial contexts—like democracy measurement—our analyses ameliorate concerns about the use of such data.

1 Expert coding of democracy

Experts perform "information retrieval and synthesis" (IRS) tasks for many social scientific projects: they gather relevant information about a concept applied to a specific case, organize and prioritize these data, and summarize them (Marquardt et al. 2025). IRS tasks require experts to retrieve—or already know—hard-to-find information and then use their

conceptual and contextual knowledge to synthesize and classify it. In particular, political scientists frequently rely on experts to code social-scientific data capturing concepts that are both difficult to observe directly and too complicated for non-experts to evaluate (Carey et al. 2019; Lindberg et al. 2014; Hooghe et al. 2010). Democracy is one such concept.

Concerns about expert coding thus intersect with crucial debates about how to measure democracy cross-nationally. Measuring democracy is inherently challenging because it is a multidimensional concept and many of its dimensions are unobservable (Riedl et al. 2024; Knutsen et al. 2024; Weitzel et al. 2024). Even for dimensions where observable indicators do exist (e.g. competitive multi-party elections; see Przeworski et al. 2000), these indicators often have large measurement errors and their own biases (Knutsen 2015; Knutsen et al. 2024). Accordingly, many democracy measures include indicators that contain an element of evaluation, and thus subjectivity, which are often scored by experts.

While debates about subjectivity in democracy measurement are not new (Przeworski et al. 2000; Munck and Verkuilen 2002), they received renewed attention with Little and Meng (2024, henceforth "L&M"). L&M argue that expert perceptions of global trends in democracy negatively bias expert perceptions about the specific countries they rate in expert-coding projects. This "global pessimism bias" could lead to measures that erroneously indicate country-specific democratic backsliding, which expert-coding enterprises subsequently aggregate back to negative global trends. Insofar as expert-based measures feed into public and academic debates on global democracy trends, global pessimism bias may even be self-reinforcing and increase over time. If so, even a world with relatively stable democracy levels could result in a prevailing narrative that the world is experiencing substantial and widespread democratic decline.

2 The expert survey

To assess L&M's claims of global pessimism bias and expert biases more broadly, we appended an opt-in survey about perceptions of democracy to the V–Dem coding task in 2024. V–Dem experts are a valuable population to examine in this context since V–Dem produces a widely-used dataset and annual reports that are prominent in both academic and policy spheres. Roughly 20% of the 2024 V–Dem experts (334 experts) completed the survey.[1]

The survey had both experimental and observational components. Experts coded four five-item Likert-scale questions about global or local (i.e., country-specific) trends. Regarding global trends, experts reported their perceptions about the degree to which levels of global democracy 1) have decreased or increased over the past decade, and 2)

[1]Analyses in Appendix C make us relatively confident that inferential risks for our analyses due to self-selection are limited in our data.

will decrease or increase in the coming decade. For local trends, experts reported their perceptions about the degree to which levels of 1) local democracy and 2) local restaurant quality have decreased or increased over the past decade. (We discuss the restaurant question when presenting the experimental results.) We experimentally varied the order of questions about past global and local trends, while the question about future global trends is the final question for all respondents.[2]

We first discuss the headline observational results, then those from the experiment. We conclude by analyzing the correlation between perceptions of trends and experts' actual V–Dem coding. Unless otherwise noted, we pre-registered all analyses and min-max rescaled all variables to a 0-1 scale to ensure comparability.[3]

3 Perceptions of democracy trends

If claims of global pessimism bias are correct, then 1) experts must be pessimistic and 2) perceptions of global and local trends must be correlated. Our observational analyses provide evidence that these necessary (but not jointly sufficient) conditions are present among V–Dem experts, with several important caveats.

V–Dem experts are pessimistic: 88% believe that global democracy levels have either slightly or substantially declined over the past decades, while 68% expect global decline in the coming decade. There is also a strong correlation between expert perceptions of global and local trends. Table 1 presents results from analyses in which we regressed responses to the question regarding perceptions of local democracy trends on responses concerning perceptions either of past global trends (columns 1-2) or expectations for future global trends (columns 3-4). Across analyses, there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between global and local perceptions. This relationship is robust to fixed effects for experts' self-reported country of primary expertise and the specific surveys they coded for this country (columns 2 and 4).[4]

There are three important caveats to these analyses. First, there is no reason to assume that the direction of causality runs from global to local perceptions. It is entirely possible that some—or all—of the correlation is due to local perceptions affecting perceptions of the (harder-to-evaluate) global trends, for instance because experts may place too much emphasis on countries they know well when aggregating globally. If so, global pessimism is not the source of bias, but a result of plausibly accurate perceptions of local phenomena.

Second, the relationship between global and local perceptions is strong in magnitude, but not determinative. For example, Model 2 indicates that experts who perceive global

[2]Appendix A contains complete survey questions, Appendix B descriptive statistics, and Appendix D details about the experimental design.

[3]Appendix F includes results from pre-registered analyses not reported in the text.

[4]V–Dem experts rate only a subset of V–Dem surveys related to specific concepts such as elections or the judiciary, based on areas of expertise.

Table 1: Linear regression analyses of perceptions of local trends in democracy on perceptions of global trends

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Constant	0.26***	0.22**	0.30***	0.25**
	(0.03)	(0.09)	(0.03)	(0.10)
Global trends (past)	0.44***	0.35***		
	(0.07)	(0.08)		
Global trends (future)			0.17***	0.14*
			(0.06)	(0.07)
Treatment	−0.03	−0.003	−0.04	−0.01
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Country FE	N	Y	N	Y
Survey FE	N	Y	N	Y
Observations	332	331	330	330
R^2	0.10	0.72	0.03	0.69
Note:		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01		

democracy levels as having substantially increased over the past decade perceive trends in their main country of interest as only 0.35 points higher than experts who perceive that global levels have substantially decreased.

Third, expectations about trends in democracy in the next decade have a substantially weaker relationship with perceptions of local trends than do perceptions of the past: going from the minimum to the maximum value on this scale corresponds to a 0.14-change on the local perception scale (Model 4). Although we did not preregister expectations about the differences in these results, they are perhaps evidence that experts can conceptually parse different types of trends: perceptions of the past do not determine expectations for the future.

4 Experimental analyses

These observational analyses demonstrate that some necessary conditions for global pessimism bias are present among V–Dem experts. However, our experimental analyses yield little evidence for L&M's claim of a causal relationship of global on local perceptions of democracy, which we formulate as:

H1: Priming respondents to think about global democracy trends increases their percep-

tions of democratic backsliding in their primary country of expertise.

To test H1, we randomized question order so that approximately half of the experts were exposed to the question about perceptions of (past) global trends in democracy prior to questions on local trends in democracy and restaurant quality. In the control condition, experts received the questions in the opposite order.[5]

The first row of Table 4 illustrates the difference in perceptions of local trends between respondents in the treatment and control conditions. A 0-value in a given condition would indicate that all respondents perceive substantial declines in levels of local democracy, while a 1-value would indicate that all experts perceive substantial increases. Although the average evaluation of trends is slightly more positive in the control than in the treatment condition (0.35 vs. 0.31), this difference is insignificant at the 0.05-level.

Table 2: Experimental tests of H1

	Control	Treatment	Difference
Local trends (democracy)	0.35	0.31	-0.04 (-0.11, 0.02)
Local trends (restaurants)	0.71	0.63	-0.08 (-0.14, -0.02)

Point estimates represent average perceptions of trends (scaled 0-1) or estimated difference in average perceptions between control and treatment groups. 95% confidence intervals around the estimated differences in parentheses.

We also tested whether perceptions of global democratic backsliding induce pessimism about a local phenomenon plausibly unrelated to democracy: trends in restaurant quality in an expert's main country of expertise. To do so, we randomly exposed respondents to a question about these trends before or after the question about global trends. As the second row in Table 4 illustrates, exposure to the global trends question first causes respondents to be slightly less optimistic (a difference of eight percent of the scale range) about trends in local restaurant quality; this effect is statistically significant at the 0.05-level.

These results indicate that priming experts about global democracy trends can make them more pessimistic about local phenomena—but not their topic of expertise, democracy—reinforcing the notion that experts can conceptually parse different phenomena when evaluating trends.

5 Expert perceptions and trend coding

Our final analyses directly assess the relationship between expert perceptions of local and global trends and actual V–Dem ratings (Coppedge et al. 2024). Although these analyses

[5] *Post-hoc* power analyses in Appendix E indicate that our survey was sufficiently powered to detect reasonably sized effects.

are not causal—V–Dem coding preceded our survey—our findings run counter to claims about global pessimism bias. Instead, they indicate that experts are able to disentangle their perceptions of local and global trends and refer to the former over the latter when coding their countries of expertise. Equally important, the results suggest that the relevance of general perceptions of democracy trends for coding behavior varies: variables most directly related to democracy show the strongest relationship with perceptions of local democracy trends.

In these analyses, we regress the change in an expert's codings of their main country of expertise over a period that roughly aligns with the last decade on their perceptions of democracy trends, both locally and globally. Equation 1 presents our model:

$$ET_i = \alpha + \beta Q_{ij} + \gamma T_{ij} + \Psi_{ik} + \Upsilon_{il} + e_{ijkl} \tag{1}$$

ET represents the standardized difference in values for expert j's coding of V-Dem variable l for their main country of expertise k from 2012 to 2023. ET values range from -1 to 1, with -1 representing a change from the top ordinal category of a variable to the bottom between 2012 and 2023; 1 represents the opposite change of the same magnitude.[6] β is the parameter of interest, with Q representing the questions about local or global trends in democracy. In all analyses, we control for measurement error induced by the experiment with γ, and include country and V–Dem indicator fixed effects (Ψ and Υ, respectively).

We replicate the analyses with three different datasets of ET indicators, ordered from those expected to have the weakest to the strongest positive β estimates based on global pessimism bias:

Maximalist: All expert-coded ordinal-scale variables in the V–Dem dataset. The variables in this dataset should have the weakest relationship with perceptions of trends in democracy because many V–Dem variables are not directly related to common conceptions of democracy.

Liberal Democracy: All expert-coded ordinal-scale variables in the V–Dem Liberal Democracy Index. Since these variables are the most directly related to common conceptions of democracy, they should have a strong relationship with perceptions of trends in democracy.

Most likely: The eight expert-coded variables from the liberal democracy index we deemed most likely to be susceptible to global pessimism bias due to their vagueness and

[6]Appendix B provides additional details.

complexity.

Table 3 divides the results of these analyses into three sets. The first set (columns 1-3) shows results from the regressions of V–Dem coding trends on perceptions of local political trends. The second set (columns 4-6) shows results from the corresponding regressions using perceptions of past global trends. The third set (columns 7-9) shows results for expectations of future global trends. In all three sets, the first model uses the maximalist dataset, the second the liberal democracy dataset, and the third the most likely dataset.

Columns 1-3 show that perceptions of local trends (columns 1-3) have a clear correlation with trends in actual V–Dem coding in experts' main country of interest. This relationship is weakest in the maximalist dataset (column 1), which includes variables with a tenuous relationship to common conceptions of democracy. The relationship is stronger, and similar, in regressions that analyze both the liberal democracy and most likely datasets, both of which include only variables clearly linked to democracy.

Although the relationship between perceptions of past global trends in democracy and V–Dem coding behavior (columns 4-6) is statistically significant, this relationship is weaker in magnitude than in the previous set of analyses. Again, the relationship between these perceptions and coding behavior is weakest in the maximalist dataset (column 4), stronger in the liberal democracy dataset (column 5), and strongest in the most likely dataset (column 6). However, even for the most likely dataset the relationship remains relatively small-in-magnitude and weaker than that for perceptions of local trends (column 3).

Finally, expectations of future global trends in democracy show a generally weak relationship with actual V–Dem coding behavior (columns 7-9).

Table 3: Linear regression analyses of V–Dem coding trends on perceptions of political trends

	Local			Global					
	All	Liberal	Likely	All	Liberal	Likely	All	Liberal	Likely
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Local trends	0.09***	0.16***	0.16***						
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.04)						
Global trends (past)				0.05***	0.09***	0.12***			
				(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.04)			
Global trends (future)							0.02***	0.05***	0.03
							(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.04)
Treatment	0.005	0.004	−0.004	0.005	0.003	−0.001	0.004	0.002	−0.002
	(0.003)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.003)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.003)	(0.01)	(0.02)
Constant	−0.04**	−0.04**	−0.01	−0.02	−0.03	0.03	−0.02	−0.03	0.04
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.05)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.04)
Country FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Variable FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	33,661	8,117	1,421	34,047	8,209	1,437	34,014	8,197	1,435
R^2	0.08	0.19	0.23	0.08	0.18	0.24	0.08	0.18	0.23

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

To contextualize these results, we ran Monte Carlo simulations to predict the average change in V–Dem coding across variables and countries that would occur in datasets with different distributions of experts.[7] Specifically, we analyzed simulated datasets in which experts were 1) as pessimistic as possible about trends in democracy, 2) neutral, and 3) as optimistic as possible; as well as datasets that reflect the ecological (largely pessimistic) distribution in our survey and its "opposite" distribution (largely optimistic, with the same distance to the neutral distribution as in the ecological one). For each dataset, we randomly selected 10,000 country-variable combinations from the Liberal Democracy analyses (Models 2, 5 and 8 in Table 3), predicted the change that would occur for each pessimism-country-variable combination, and then took a random draw from a normal distribution centered about this prediction and its associated standard error.

Figure 1 presents the results of these analyses, showing the median predicted change in V–Dem liberal democracy variable scores for datasets with different distributions of experts, as well as the associated 95% credible intervals. The figure scale ranges from -1 to 1, representing the maximum possible changes (going from the top of an ordinal scale to the bottom, and *vice versa*). Different cells represent different types of perceptions: perceptions of past global trends in democracy (top, Model 5 in Table 3), future trends (center, Model 8), and past local trends (bottom, Model 2).

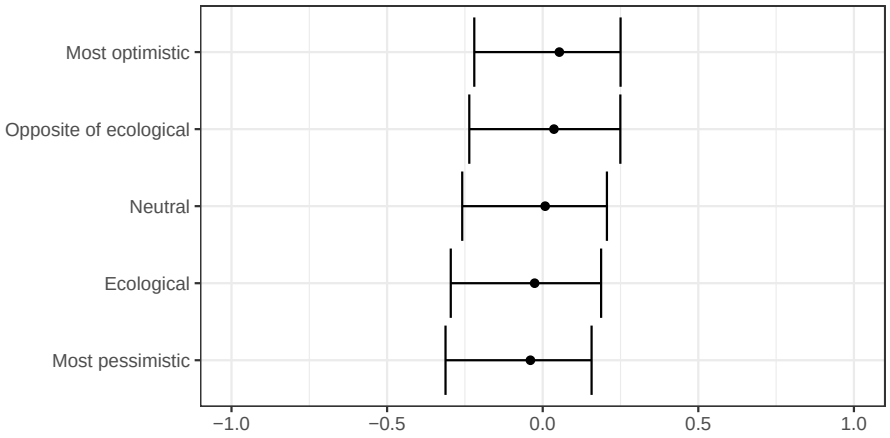
All three cells reveal that country- and variable-specific factors swamp the effect of expert perceptions on their coding behavior. Although there is a positive relationship between levels of optimism and coding behavior, this relationship is small and only visually clear in the local trend perceptions dataset (bottom cell), where 87% of the draws from the most optimistic dataset have more positive trends in the coding of V-Dem Liberal Democracy indicators than the most pessimistic dataset. The equivalent statistics are 74% and 63% for perceptions of past and future trends in democracy, respectively. As an illustration of the magnitude of predicted relationships, the median predicted change in V–Dem liberal democracy variable scores is -0.03 for the ecologically valid global trends (past) dataset and 0.04 for its opposite (a roughly three percent difference in the scale). These results indicate that expert pessimism about global democracy plays a minor role at most in expert coding behavior with regard to crucial V–Dem democracy indicators.

6 Conclusion

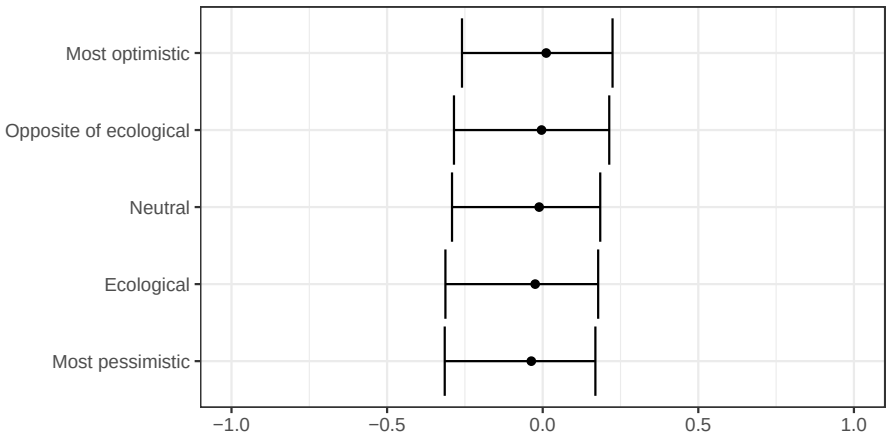
In this note, we assess concerns about expert biases in democracy measurement, focusing on L&M's claim that perceptions of global democratic backsliding influence experts' ratings of democracy indicators for particular countries. We find that V–Dem experts tend to be pessimistic about global trends in democracy and their perceptions of trends in

[7] Appendix G provides additional information and prediction results. We did not preregister these analyses.

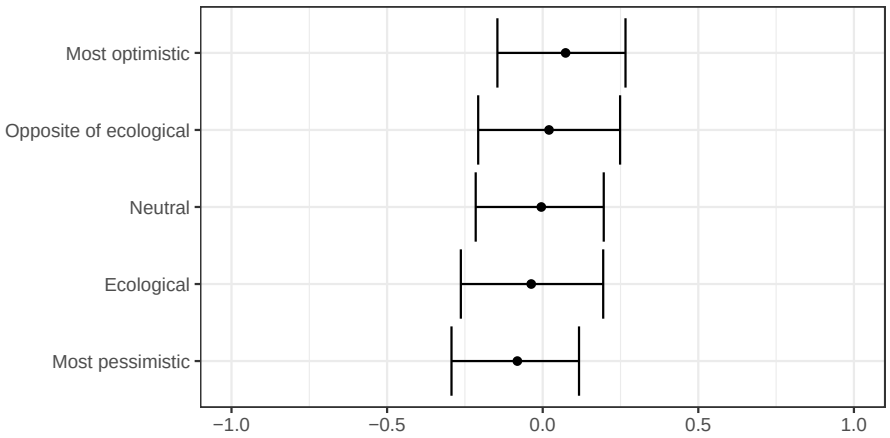
Figure 1: Predicted relationship between perceptions of trends in democracy and V–Dem coding of liberal democracy indicators by type of perception and level of optimism in dataset



(a) Global trends (past)



(b) Global trends (future)



(c) Local trends

Points represent median estimate over 10,000 simulated draws and horizontal lines 95% credible intervals.

democracy globally and their countries of expertise are correlated. However, we find little evidence that perceptions of global trends causally affect perceptions of country-specific trends.

Equally importantly, we find little support for the claim that global pessimism bias meaningfully affects experts' actual ratings of V–Dem indicators in a way that could plausibly explain reported trends in democratic backsliding. Although there is a correlation between perceptions of global democracy trends and expert assessment of changes in V–Dem variables for their main country of expertise, this relationship is relatively small in magnitude and weaker than that between perceptions of local trends and these expert assessments. In addition to indicating that the form of bias that L&M propose has limited practical significance for democracy ratings, our results also show that experts are likely able to conceptually disentangle different types of trends in different countries.

Our findings represent a critical step in estimating and understanding expert biases. While amorphous concerns over potential expert biases abound, this article represents a rare attempt to rigorously measure such biases and precisely identify their effects. Future research can build on this project by developing stronger-but-ecologically-valid experimental primes, as well as experiments that more closely mimic how general perceptions enter into the expert survey experience.

In the meantime, this note has several implications for the use of expert-coded data. First, the findings suggest that concerns over muddled expert survey data due to cognitive biases may be overblown; expert respondents in our sample were able to separate their general perceptions from case-specific evaluations. Second, even if such biases shift expert responses, we find little evidence they do so in a way that substantially skews measures resulting from the survey data. In practice, biases driven by subjectivity among experts may be a lesser evil than the measurement errors associated with alternative measures not based on expert coding, especially for multidimensional and complex concepts such as democracy (Knutsen et al. 2024).

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Online Appendix: Global Trends and Expert Perceptions

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A Survey questionnaire

This study—conducted by researchers at [***] — examines how experts think about trends in different institutions, both globally and nationally.

To participate in this study, you and other V–Dem Country Experts will complete a short (approximately 5 minute) online survey. Your responses will be linked only to your anonymous V–Dem expert ID, as used in V–Dem's publicly available coder-level dataset. Your responses will never be linked to your identity.

Although your answers will be made publicly available as part of a social scientific dataset, they will not appear on the V-Dem website or in the V–Dem dataset.

You may withdraw from participation at any time. If you have further questions about this study you may email [***]. You may also contact [***] Institutional Review Board at [***] with any questions or concerns. If you are willing to participate, please indicate your consent by clicking on the "Begin Survey" button below. Thank you for your time!

***

This survey will depart from the V–Dem format in a variety of ways. The intention is to gather your immediate reaction to the following questions.

***

What is your primary country of expertise among those which you coded for V–Dem? [DROP DOWN SELECTION]

***

Q1 What is your overall impression of trends in global democracy over the past decade?

1. The average level of democracy around the world has **substantially declined** over the past decade.
2. The average level of democracy around the world has **slightly declined** over the past decade.
3. The average level of democracy around the world has **largely stayed the same** over the past decade.
4. The average level of democracy around the world has **slightly increased** over the past decade.
5. The average level of democracy around the world has **substantially increased** over the past decade.

***

Q2 What is your overall impression of trends in democracy in [COUNTRY] over the past decade?

1. The level of democracy in [COUNTRY] has **substantially declined** over the past decade.
2. The level of democracy in [COUNTRY] has **slightly declined** over the past decade.

3. The level of democracy in [COUNTRY] has **largely stayed the same** over the past decade.
4. The level of democracy in [COUNTRY] has **slightly increased** over the past decade.
5. The level of democracy in [COUNTRY] has **substantially increased** over the past decade.

***

Q3 What is your overall impression of trends in restaurant quality in [COUNTRY] over the past decade?

1. Restaurant quality in [COUNTRY] has **substantially declined** over the past decade.
2. Restaurant quality in [COUNTRY] has **slightly declined** over the past decade.
3. Restaurant quality in [COUNTRY] has **largely stayed the same** over the past decade.
4. Restaurant quality in [COUNTRY] has **slightly increased** over the past decade.
5. Restaurant quality in [COUNTRY] has **substantially increased** over the past decade.

***

Q4 What do you expect the overall trend in global democracy will be over the next decade?

1. Over the next decade, I expect the average level of democracy around the world to **substantially decline**.
2. Over the next decade, I expect the average level of democracy around the world to **slightly decline**.
3. Over the next decade, I expect the average level of democracy around the world to **largely stay the same**.
4. Over the next decade, I expect the average level of democracy around the world to **slightly increase**.
5. Over the next decade, I expect the average level of democracy around the world to **substantially increase**.

B Descriptive statistics and additional details on variable construction

B.1 Analyses of experts who completed backsliding survey

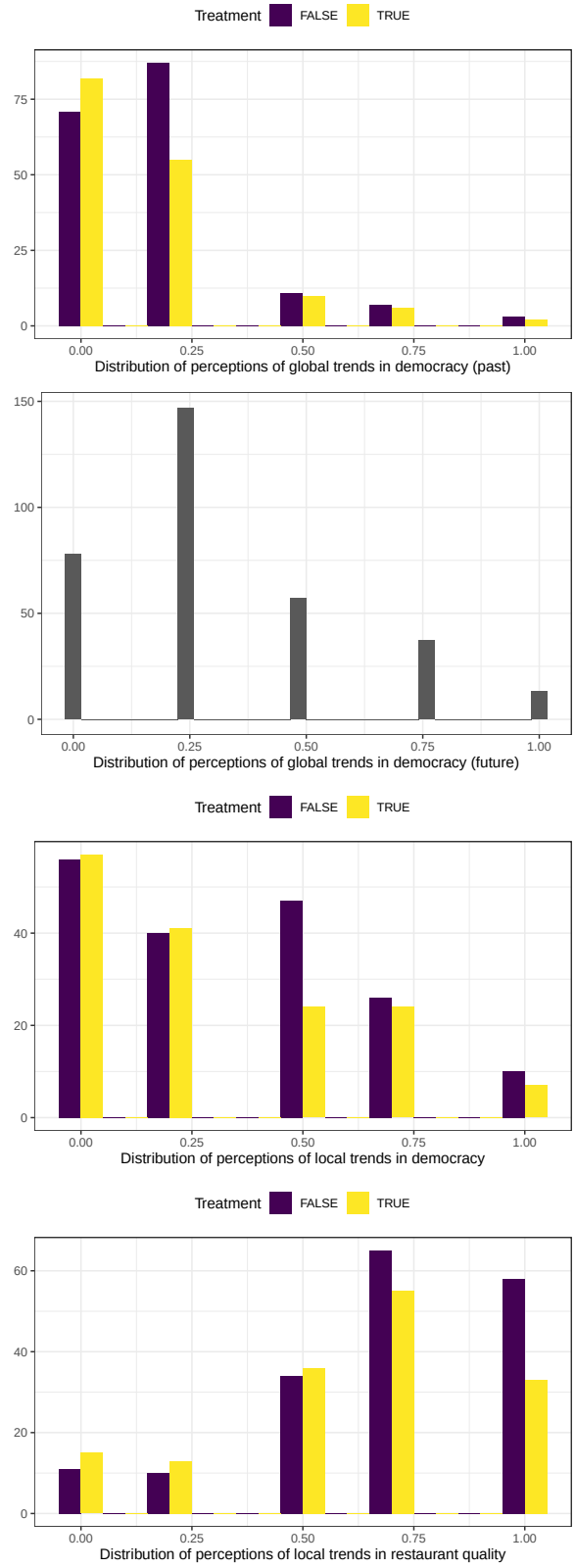
Table B.1 reports descriptive statistics for analyses that only include experts who completed the backsliding survey. Figure B.1 presents the distribution of responses to survey questions about perceptions of trends.

Table B.1: Descriptive statistics, Tables 1 & 2

Treated	0.46
Global trends (past)	0.18 (0.21)
Local trends (democracy)	0.33 (0.31)
Local trends (restaurants)	0.67 (0.29)
Global trends (future)	0.32 (0.27)
Executive survey	0.55
Judiciary survey	0.46
Legislature survey	0.53
Media survey	0.51
Political equality survey	0.56
Sovereignty survey	0.47
Exclusion survey	0.50
Digital society survey	0.44
Civic and academic space survey	0.52
Regimes survey	0.54
Parties survey	0.60
Deliberation survey	0.44
Civil liberties survey	0.53
Civil society survey	0.57
Elections survey	0.60
Backsliding country	0.23

Country fixed effects statistics: the median number of coders per primary country is 2, the average is 2.53; minimum 1 and maximum 13. Average reported for dichotomous indicators, average and standard deviation for other variables. All variables min-max rescaled to values 0-1.

Figure B.1: Predicted relationship between perceptions of trends in democracy and V–Dem coding of most-likely ordinal indicators by type of perception and level of optimism in dataset



Lower values represent perceptions of more negative trends, higher values perceptions of more positive trends. Yellow represents respondents exposed to global question prior to local questions (treatment), purple those exposed to opposite order (control).

We operationalize backsliding countries as those where we are more than 95% confident that a decline occurred from 2012 to 2023, according to the V–Dem electoral democracy index. If an expert reported such a country as their primary country of expertise they received a value of 1, zero otherwise.

B.2 Analyses of V–Dem coding trends

We analyze coding trends using three different datasets, listed in order of the likelihood that they would be affected by global pessimism bias:

Maximalist: All expert-coded ordinal-scale variables in the V–Dem dataset

Liberal Democracy: All expert-coded ordinal-scale variables in the V–Dem Liberal Democracy Index (i.e., in the Liberal Democracy Component Index or in the Electoral Democracy Index)

Most likely: Expert-coded variables that are the most likely to be susceptible to global pessimism bias, which we operationalize as the seven most vague Liberal/Electoral Democracy Index variables (v2clacfree, v2cseeorgs, v2elpeace, v2mebias, v2merange, v2clfmove, and v2lgqstexp).[1] We also include the overall free and fair elections indicator, v2elfrfair, because it is very general and has been highlighted in prior studies as a variable that might be more prone to bias than other, more specific V-Dem variables.

In all analyses the coding trend variable, ET, represents the normalized difference in values for an expert's coding for a given V–Dem variable (m) over a period that roughly aligns with the past decade. More specifically, $ET = V_{t1} - V_{t0}$, where V is the min-max rescaled value of an expert's rating for variable V at time $t1$ minus the the equivalent value at time $t0$ (min-max rescaling uses the specific range of ordinal scale values for each V). For most variable-expert combinations $t1$ is the most recent coding in the year 2023 and $t0$ the most recent coding in 2012 (the year in which EDI had its highest global average value).[2] However, not all V-Dem variables have codings for 2012 or 2023. For example, election variables are only coded for years with elections. In these cases, we use the prior values of an expert-variable combination temporally closest to 2012 and 2023 as the $t0$ and $t1$ values, with a five-year cut-off. If prior codings exceed the five-year window — or if the country-variable was experiencing an electoral interruption or otherwise had no valid value for either $t1$ or $t0$ — we code ET_m as missing. Similarly, we remove the codings of experts who idiosyncratically chose not to provide values for either $t0$ or $t1$ for a specific country-variable. (For example, if there was an election in an expert's primary country in 2012, but they did not code that election for a given variable, there is no ET for that expert-country-variable).

Table B.2 provides the descriptive statistics for these analyses. We also note that, in the maximalist dataset, the average number of observations per V–Dem variable is 165, with a median of 166; the number ranges from 66 to 201. In the liberal democracy

[1] We thank Andrew Little (personal communication, 08.12.2023) for helping us determine inclusion criteria for the variables in this dataset.

[2] In the analysis plan, we specified the dates 31.12.2023 and 31.12.2023. However, in rare cases experts provide a rating for an earlier date in the year, which is then treated as the rating through December 31, unless the expert provides another rating for a later date. Our practice is thus best described as including the December 31 rating or its equivalent.

Table B.2: Descriptive statistics, Table 3

	Maximalist	Liberal democracy	Most likely
ET	-0.01 (0.22)	-0.03 (0.22)	-0.04 (0.27)
Local trends	0.35 (0.31)	0.34 (0.31)	0.35 (0.31)
Global trends (past)	0.18 (0.22)	0.18 (0.22)	0.18 (0.22)
Global trends (future)	0.33 (0.27)	0.33 (0.28)	0.33 (0.27)
Treated	0.46	0.47	0.47

Average reported for dichotomous indicators, average and standard deviation for other variables. ET values range from -1 to 1; all variables min-max rescaled to values 0-1.

dataset, the average is 178, median 177; and range is from 151 to 201. In the most likely dataset, the mean is 180, median 177; and range is from 169 to 192.

In the maximalist dataset, the average number of observations per country is 258, with a median of 212; the number ranges from 4 to 1,009. In the liberal democracy dataset, the average is 64, median 49, and range is from 1 to 261. In the most likely dataset, the mean is 11, median is 9; and range is from 1 to 44.

B.3 Representativeness checks and appendix variables

Many of the variables we use in balance and representativeness checks are from the V–Dem post-survey questionnaire, which we operationalize as follows.

1. Gender (v2zzgender). Female = 1, 0 otherwise.
2. Education (v2zzedlev). Completed PhD = 0, 1 otherwise.
3. Country of education (v2zzedcnt). "Western" countries (USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, EEA, UK, Switzerland) = 1, 0 otherwise.
4. Year of birth (v2zzborn). Coarsen by decade (01 to 10) and rescale to 0-1 using min-max; reverse scale so that higher values are older respondents.
5. Country of residence (v2zzreside). Recoded so that experts whose main country of expertise is their country of residence have a value of 0, 1 otherwise.
6. Support for free markets (v2zzfremrk). Likert scale, min-max rescaled to 0-1.
7. Support for Electoral democracy (v2zzelcdem). Likert scale, min-max rescaled to 0-1.
8. Support for Liberal democracy (v2zzlibdem). Likert scale, min-max rescaled to 0-1.

C Sample representativeness

Approximately 20% of experts for the 2024 V–Dem survey opted-in to our survey. In this section, we provide additional details about this sample, as well as analyses of its representativeness of the broader body of 2024 V–Dem experts.

First, we note that V–Dem compiles different statistics regarding the number of experts involved in the coding for a given year (e.g. number of experts who agreed to code, only partially completed a survey, and who completed one or more surveys). For the purposes of our representativeness checks—and for estimating the proportion of experts who participated in our survey—we consider a 2024 V–Dem expert to be one who evaluated 10 or more country-variables in the 2024 coding round. We then further excluded those experts who did not code for their primary country in 2024, since we use coding for a primary country as the basis for our analyses. The final sample frame thus included 1,681 experts, of whom 334 completed our survey (roughly 20%).[3]

Second, we compare the degree to which experts who opted into our survey are representative of the 2024 V–Dem coders more generally. To do so, we use three linear probability models:

$$y_i = \alpha + \beta B_i + \zeta E_i + e_i \tag{2}$$
$$y_i = \alpha + \gamma D_i + \zeta E_i + \Psi_{ij} + \Omega_{ik} + e_{ijk} \tag{3}$$
$$y_i = \alpha + P_{io}\delta_o + \zeta E_i + e_i \tag{4}$$

y is a dichotomous indicator for expert i's participation in the opt-in survey (1=participant, 0 otherwise; representativeness of sample analyses). In all models, ζ represents the degree to which an expert who uses a language other than English in their V–Dem coding is more or less likely to take the original survey.

In the model which Equation 2 represents, β measures the degree to which experts who code backsliding countries as their primary country of coding are more or less likely to take the survey.[4] In the model represented by Equation 3, γ measures the degree to which experts who code positive trends in democracy are more or less likely to participate in the survey, conditional on their primary country of expertise (Ψ) and V–Dem surveys they code (Ω).[5] We do not interpret Ψ or Ω, since we expect many spurious correlations given the large number of fixed effect parameters. The model illustrated by Equation 4 is mainly exploratory, with parameters δ assessing the relationship between different V–Dem post-survey questionnaire (PSQ) variables and participation in the survey.

Table C.1 presents the results of these analyses. The key result is the null findings in Models 1 and 2: there is no clear evidence of a relationship between opting-in to our survey and either 1) coding a backsliding country or 2) an expert's coding of liberal democracy variables. Both expertise in a backsliding country and strong perceptions of changes in liberal democracy could clearly affect an expert's perceptions of backsliding. The fact that there is no clear difference between experts who opted in to our survey and

[3]In the preregistration we reported a sampling frame of 1,697 experts — a figure based on data from the V–Dem Institute that used slightly different criteria for inclusion than our current approach — and a cut-off of 340 experts (20% of 1,697) for conducting subsequent analyses. Our initial sample of experts was 351 (21% of 1,697), meeting this cut-off point. We subsequently excluded 17 surveys from the sample because the relevant respondents: 1) did not begin the survey by consenting to participation, 2) did not provide any responses to questions about trends, or 3) took the survey multiple times (we only use data from the first survey in which an expert consented to participation).

[4]We define a backsliding country as before: one which we are 95% confident has a lower electoral democracy index score in 2023 than in 2012. If an expert reported such a country as their primary country of expertise they received a value of 1, zero otherwise.

[5]We operationalize positive coding trends as being the average ET for an expert across those liberal democracy variables they coded.

those who did not along these two metrics alleviates concerns about the biggest inferential risks related to representativeness in our study.

The exploratory analyses in Model 3 indicate that the only demographic characteristic highly correlated with participation is having a PhD, with experts without a PhD being less likely to participate in the survey. This result has no clear implications for our analyses, though we note that experts without a PhD are a minority of V–Dem experts.

D Experimental design and balance checks

We randomly assigned participants in the survey to one of four question order groups, as follows:

Group 1 (25%): Q1 (global democracy trends in the past), Q2 (local democracy trends), Q3 (local restaurant trends), Q4 (global democracy trends in the future)

Group 2 (25%): Q1, Q3, Q2, Q4

Group 3 (25%): Q2, Q3, Q1, Q4

Group 4 (25%): Q3, Q2, Q1, Q4

The key experimental distinction is between Groups 1 and 2 (Treatment, exposed to Q1 first) and Groups 3 and 4 (Control, exposed to Q2 and Q3 first). We randomized the order of Q2 and Q3 to randomly distribute any priming effects of exposure to these questions.

D.1 Explanation of treatment

Here we provided an expanded explanation of the logic behind our experimental treatment (exposure to Q1 prior to Q2 and Q3). The L&M theoretical framework holds that exposure to pessimistic narratives has caused experts to become generally pessimistic about global democracy trends. This global pessimism then causes experts to be more pessimistic about the state of democracy in their specific countries of expertise, pessimism which they reflect in their ratings of these countries. Our experiment tests the link between the second and third links in this causal chain (global perceptions affect local perceptions of democracy trends), as opposed to the link between the first and third elements (pessimistic information about global backsliding affects local perceptions about democracy trends).

We highlight two important caveats to this design here. First, this treatment assumes that L&M are correct that experts are generally pessimistic about global democracy trends. If this assumption is incorrect, then the treatment could have heterogeneous effects based on beliefs about global trends. However, our observational analyses demonstrate that the L&M assumption about general pessimism is well-founded: 88% of experts in the sample believe there has been global backsliding in the past decade.

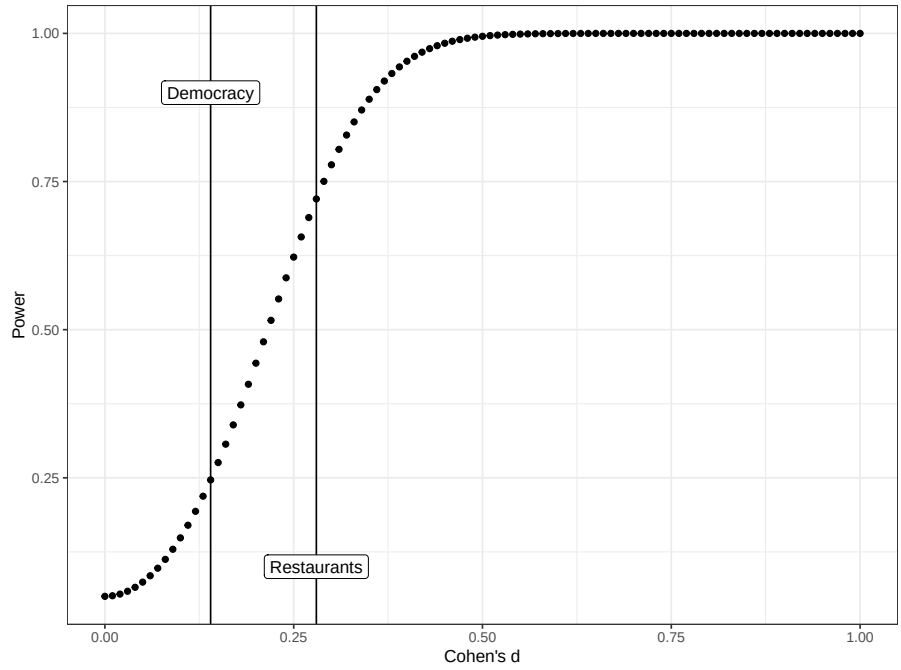
Second, this treatment could be relatively weak: it does not provide experts with new information and, even if it did, the widespread nature of backsliding discourse would likely attenuate the effects of any "new" information in this regard.[6] However, the fact that the treatment did affect expert perceptions of local restaurant trends indicates that our treatment's effect was not necessarily small, just compartmentalized.

[6]We thank Anne Meng for highlighting this concern in personal correspondence (20.12.23).

Table C.1: Sample representativeness analyses

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Backsliding country	−0.01		
	(0.02)		
Liberal democracy coding		−0.02	
		(0.11)	
Female			0.02
			(0.02)
No PhD			−0.08***
			(0.02)
Western-educated			−0.03
			(0.02)
Age			0.06
			(0.05)
Non-resident			−0.03
			(0.02)
Support electoral democracy			−0.01
			(0.05)
Support free market			−0.005
			(0.04)
Support liberal democracy			0.07
			(0.05)
Non-English survey	0.03	0.08**	0.04
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Constant	0.18***	0.35***	0.19***
	(0.02)	(0.09)	(0.06)
Survey FE	N	Y	N
Country FE	N	Y	N
Observations	1,681	1,513	1,608
R^2	0.001	0.15	0.01
Note:		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Figure E.1: Effect size and power given $N = 334$



D.2 Balance checks

We conduct balance checks using the same linear probability models that we use for analyzing the representativeness of our survey sample, replacing the outcome y with a dichotomous indicator for respondents presented with $Q1$ first (1, Treatment) vs. those presented with $Q2/3$ first (0, Control); i refers to experts who took the survey.

As Table D.1 illustrates, there is no evidence of randomization failure in our analyses.

E *Post hoc* power analyses

Although we did not conduct or preregister power analyses prior to the survey, we conducted a set of *post hoc* power analyses to better contextualize our results using the R package *pwr*. Figure E.1 shows the relationship between effect size (Cohen's d) and statistical power, given the size of our sample ($N = 334$); the vertical lines represent the observed effect sizes of the experiments on perceptions of local trends in democracy (left, difference in means of 0.04 and Cohen's d of 0.14) and restaurant quality (right, difference in means of 0.08 and Cohen's d of 0.28). The figure illustrates that our sample is likely underpowered for detecting extremely small effects, but relatively well-powered for larger effects. For example, using the square root of the mean of the two sample variances in the democracy experiment (0.29) as a standardizing unit, a difference in means of 0.05 on the 0-1 scale would have a power of 0.34; a difference in means of 0.10 would have a power of 0.87.

These *post hoc* analyses indicate that any undetected effect of priming respondents to consider the state of global democracy prior to reporting their perceptions of country-specific trends in democracy in the expert's country of expertise would have to be small.

Table D.1: Experimental balance checks

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Backsliding country	0.04		
	(0.07)		
Liberal democracy coding		0.03	
		(0.40)	
Female			−0.05
			(0.06)
No PhD			−0.01
			(0.06)
Western-educated			−0.01
			(0.06)
Age			−0.09
			(0.14)
Non-resident			0.01
			(0.06)
Support electoral democracy			0.03
			(0.13)
Support free markets			−0.14
			(0.11)
Support liberal democracy			−0.004
			(0.14)
Non-English survey	−0.03	−0.10	−0.01
	(0.08)	(0.14)	(0.08)
Constant	0.48***	0.72***	0.64***
	(0.07)	(0.22)	(0.19)
Survey FE	N	Y	N
Country FE	N	Y	N
Observations	334	320	332
R^2	0.002	0.44	0.01
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01		

F Additional pre-registered analyses

We pre-registered several additional analyses that we did not report in the text. For the sake of transparency, we report the results here.

F.1 Additional experimental analysis

We first examine whether or not the effect of the treatment (exposure to the question regarding global trends in democracy first) was greater for perceptions of trends in local democracy vs. restaurant quality. We hypothesized that priming respondents to think about global democracy trends increases their perceptions of democratic backsliding in their primary country of expertise to a greater extent than it does their perceptions of backsliding in restaurant quality.

Table F.1 reports the results of all experimental analyses to contextualize this specific analysis, which we report in the final row. The difference in treatment effects is not statistically significant and, in fact, indicates that the treatment effect on restaurant quality is, if anything, greater than its effect on perceptions of local democracy.

Table F.1: Experimental tests of exposure to global trends

	Control	Treatment	Difference
Local democracy	0.35	0.31	-0.04 (-0.11, 0.02)
Local restaurants	0.71	0.63	-0.08 (-0.14, -0.02)
$\Delta_{Treatment} < \Delta_{Control}$	-0.36	-0.32	0.04 (-0.04, 0.12)

Points represent average perceptions of trends (Q2 and Q3 rescaled 0-1). Intervals represent 95% confidence intervals about estimated difference.

F.2 Experimental reverse causality analysis

We use a t-test to assess the plausibility of reverse causality in the experiment: priming respondents to consider their specific country might influence their perceptions of global trends.

The average value of perceived global trends among respondents in the group exposed to the local perceptions question first is 0.16, compared to 0.20 for respondents in the control group (those asked about global trends first). The average difference between these two conditions is thus 0.04, with a 95% confidence interval of (-0.01, 0.08). There is thus insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis of no reverse causality.

F.3 Post-treatment correlation analysis

The experimental analyses in the text assume that experts perceive global democratic backsliding. We can relax this assumption by comparing responses to $Q2$ (local democracy trends) and $Q1$ (global democracy trends) across experimental conditions (in both cases, lower values indicate greater perceptions of backsliding) to see if there are heterogeneous treatment effects. Note that responses to $Q1$ are post-treatment for those in the control group, which means that it is impossible to disentangle the effect of observing $Q1$ vs. $Q2$ first.

Table F.2 illustrates the results of a linear regression analysis that interacts a dichotomous indicator for treatment status with responses to $Q1$. In this context, both the Treatment and its interaction with $Q1$ are not significant at the 0.05 level, our preregistered cut-off for significance. That said, the results do provide some evidence of question order effects or heterogeneous treatment effects.

Table F.2: Post-treatment linear regression analysis of perceptions of local trends on perceptions of global trends

Constant	0.29^{***} (0.03)
Global trends (past)	0.31^{***} (0.10)
Treatment	-0.08^{*} (0.04)
Treatment × Global trends (past)	0.29^{*} (0.15)
Observations	332
R^2	0.11
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

F.4 Observational reverse causality analyses

Finally, we examine the possibility of reverse causality—that local perceptions affect global perceptions of trends in democracy—by observationally examining the degree to which democratic backsliding in an expert's country of expertise affects their perceptions of global trends.

To examine this possibility, we conduct linear regression analyses in which we regress dichotomous indicators of perceptions of global backsliding in the past and future ($Q1 < 3$ and $Q4 < 3$, respectively, where values less than three indicate perceptions of backsliding) on an indicator of whether or not an expert codes a backsliding country (B).[7] The test statistic is β. A significant, positive relationship would constitute strong evidence of reverse causality: perceptions of local trends affect perceptions of global backsliding. (When analyzing $Q1$, we control for measurement error induced by the experiment with γ).

$$Q1_i < 3 = \alpha + \beta B_i + \gamma T_i + \Omega_{ik} + e_{ik} \quad (5)$$

$$Q4_i < 3 = \alpha + \beta B_i + \Omega_{ik} + e_{ik} \quad (6)$$

Table F.3 presents the results from these analyses. In neither analysis can we reject the null hypothesis of no relationship between being an expert on a backsliding country and perceptions of global backsliding.

[7] B is a dichotomous indicator of whether or not expert i's main country of expertise is backsliding, with backsliding defined as a country that we are more than 95% confident experienced a decline over the period 2012 to 2023 per the V–Dem Electoral Democracy Index (EDI).

Table F.3: Regression analyses of perceived global backsliding on coding a backsliding country

	Global backsliding (past)	Global backsliding (future)
Constant	0.83***	0.72***
	(0.08)	(0.11)
Backsliding country	0.05	−0.02
	(0.04)	(0.06)
Treatment	−0.003	
	(0.04)	
Survey FE	Y	Y
Observations	333	332
R^2	0.04	0.07
Note:		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

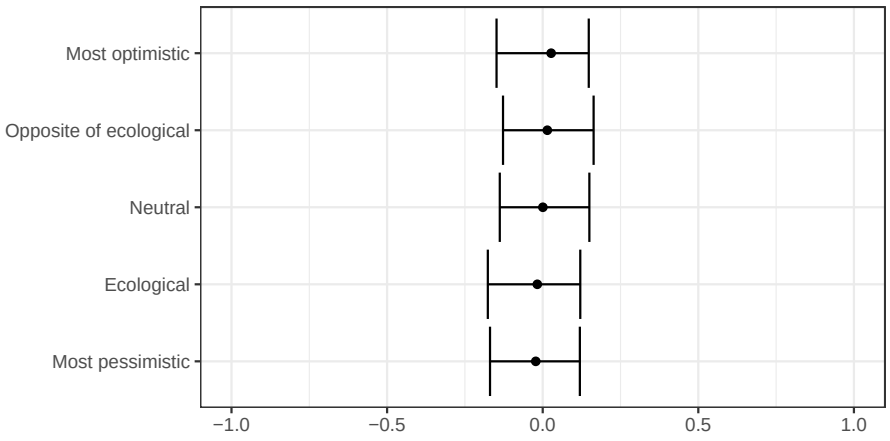
G Additional details on predictions

Figure G.1 presents the algorithm we use to predict the relationship between perceptions of democracy trends and coding behavior. In addition to the analyses of liberal democracy coding discussed in the text, we also conducted analyses to predict the relationship for all V–Dem ordinal variables (the maximalist dataset) and the variables most likely to be affected by pessimism (the most likely dataset). Figures G.2 and G.3 present these results, which are substantively similar to those for the liberal democracy variables: taking the measurement error associated with country- and variable-specific factors into account weakens the relationship between perceptions and actual coding, especially for global trend perceptions.

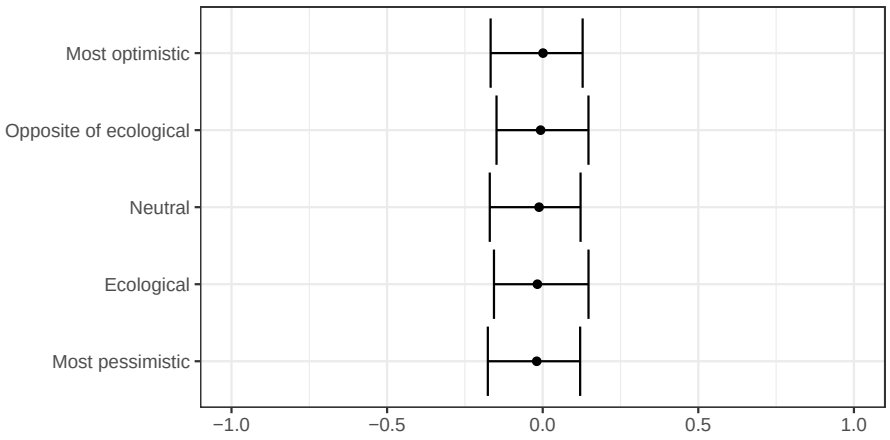
Figure G.1: Prediction algorithm

1. Set value of treatment at zero, and set value of pessimism based on dataset.
    - For datasets with different levels of pessimism (ecological and opposite of ecological datasets), randomly select a respondent from the survey dataset and use their level of pessimism for the relevant trend.
    - For opposite of ecological datasets, subtract selected pessimism value from 1 (pessimism scores standardized to range 0-1).
2. Randomly draw a country and variable, each with equal probabilities.
3. Predict mean change in V–Dem coding using parameter values from relevant pessimism-country-variable values.
4. Take random draw from a normal distribution centered about predicted change and with associated standard error.
5. Record draw and repeat 1,000x (appendix analyses) or 10,000x (main text) to generate relevant distributions.

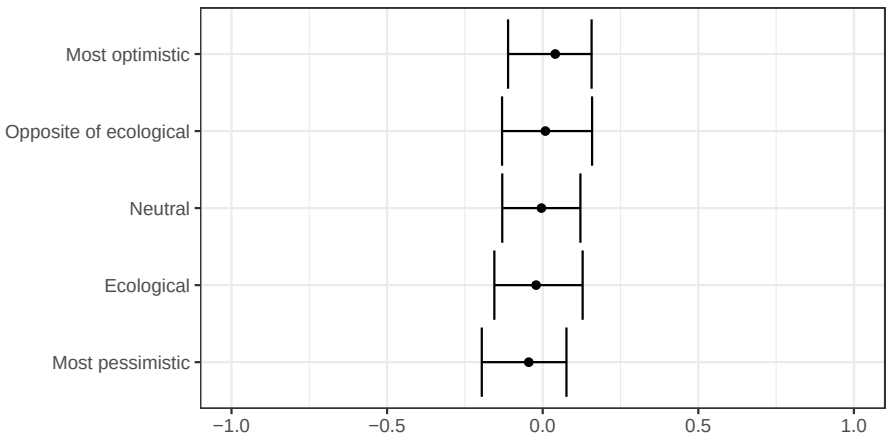
Figure G.2: Predicted relationship between perceptions of trends in democracy and V–Dem coding of all ordinal indicators (maximalist dataset) by type of perception and level of optimism in dataset



(a) Global trends (past)



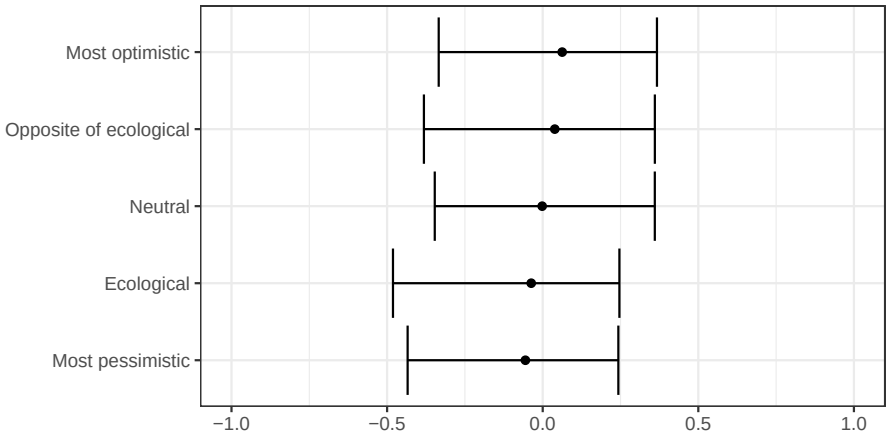
(b) Global trends (future)



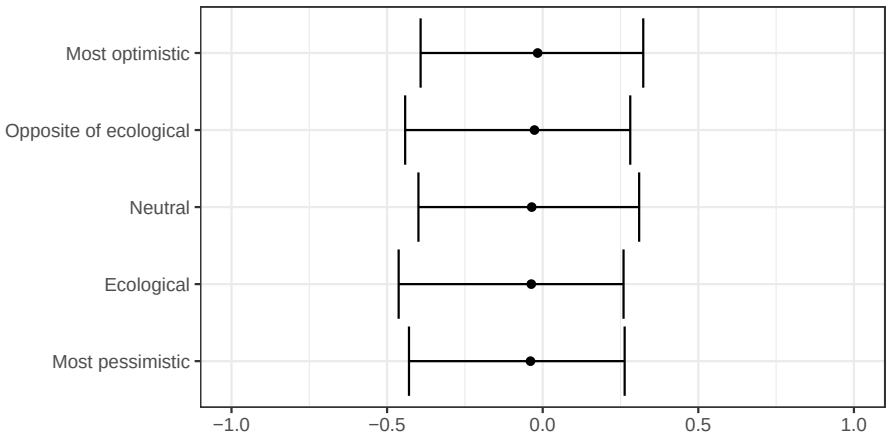
(c) Local trends

Points represent median estimate over 1,000 simulated draws and horizontal lines 95% credible intervals.

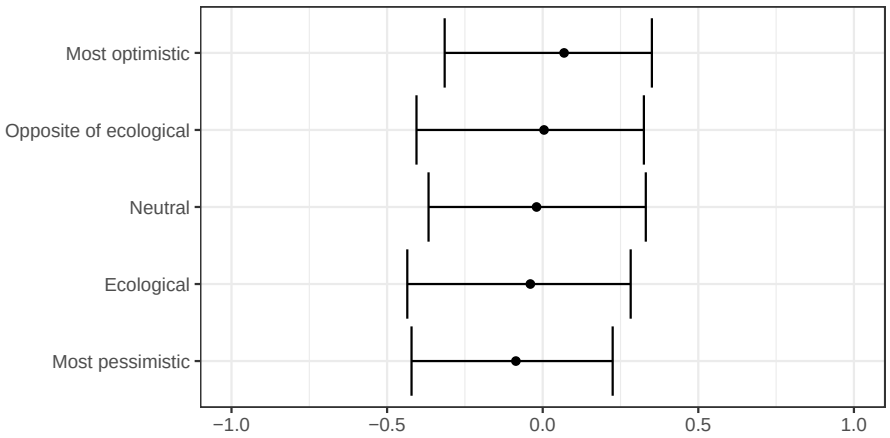
Figure G.3: Predicted relationship between perceptions of trends in democracy and V–Dem coding of most-likely ordinal indicators by type of perception and level of optimism in dataset



(a) Global trends (past)



(b) Global trends (future)



(c) Local trends

Points represent median estimate over 1,000 simulated draws and horizontal lines 95% credible intervals.