

Does Demography Determine Democratic Attitudes?

Context & Research Question

Growing dissatisfaction with democracy and spread of populist platforms imperil the stability of Western democracies. Attitudes differ markedly between the young and old with respect to voting, right-wing populism, and policies. These differences raise concerns that demographic change poses major challenges for democracy.

Research question: Does demography determine attitudes toward democracy?

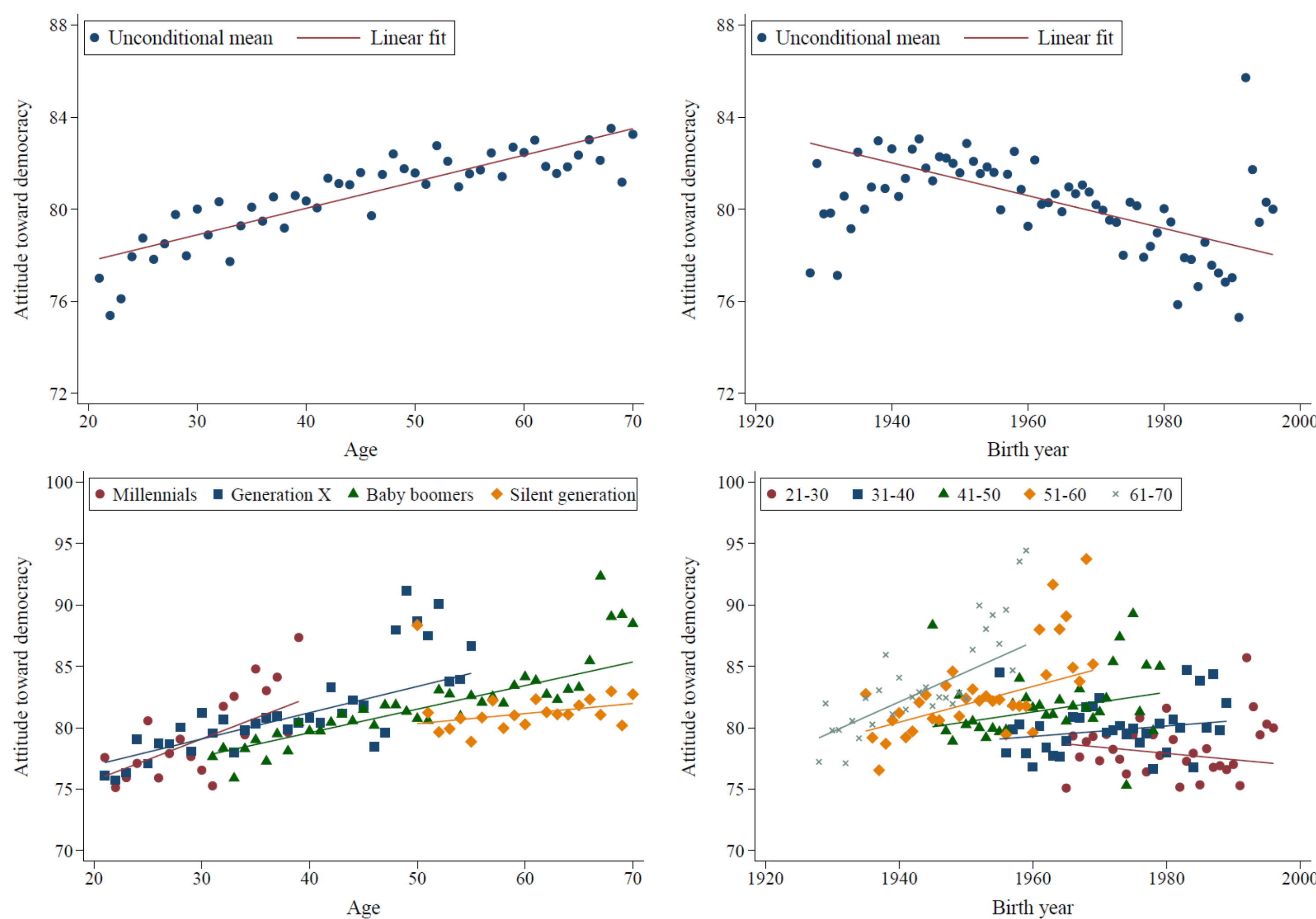


Figure 1. Identification problem: Do attitudes of the young and old differ because of age? Or because the young and old grew up in different economic and geo-political contexts?

Data

We use waves 3–7 of the World Value Survey (1994–2022), which includes 225,000 individual observations from 243 surveys in 95 countries. The data contain demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, and democratic attitudes.

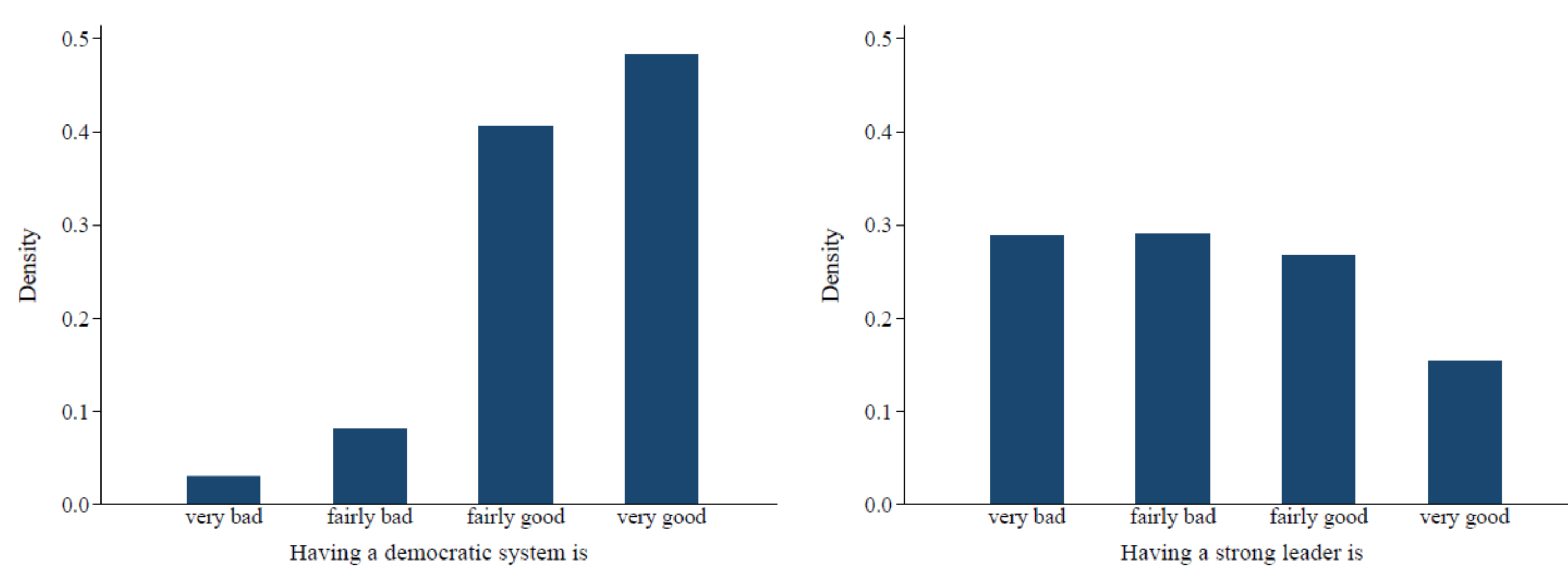


Figure 2. Distribution of survey responses

Empirical Framework

Model: Non-parametric structure in age, cohort, and period dimensions

$$Y_{iabc}^* = \sum_{a \in \mathcal{A}} \alpha_a D_a + \sum_{b \in \mathcal{B}} \beta_b D_b + \zeta_{ct} + W'_{iabc} \delta + \varepsilon_{iabc}$$

- Y_{iabc}^* : attitudes of person i in age group a , birth cohort b , country c at time t
- D_a : age group dummies (age effects)
- D_b : birth cohort dummies (cohort effects)
- ζ_{ct} : country-wave fixed effects (period effects)
- W_{iabc} : covariates (socioeconomic status, experience with democracy,...)
- ε_{iabc} : error term

Coding:

- Age groups: 21–30, 31–40, 41–50, 51–60, 61–70
- Cohorts: **silent generation** (1928–1945), **baby boomers** (1946–1964), **Generation X** (1965–1980), **millennials** (1981–1996)

Identification: The model leverages variation across age-cohort-period cells to identify age and cohort gradients (“deviations” from group means) up to the unidentified intercepts of the respective reference categories (group means).

Estimation: Ordinary least squares and heteroskedastic ordered probit

Attitudes in Western Democracies

Demography determines democratic attitudes:

- Support for democracy increases monotonically with age
- Non-monotonic cohort profile with lowest support among millennials
- Opposite patterns for attitudes toward autocracy (e.g., strong leader)

How important is demography compared to socioeconomic status?

- Support for democracy increases with educational attainment and income
- Differences in support for democracy due to socioeconomic status are an order of magnitude larger than differences due to demography

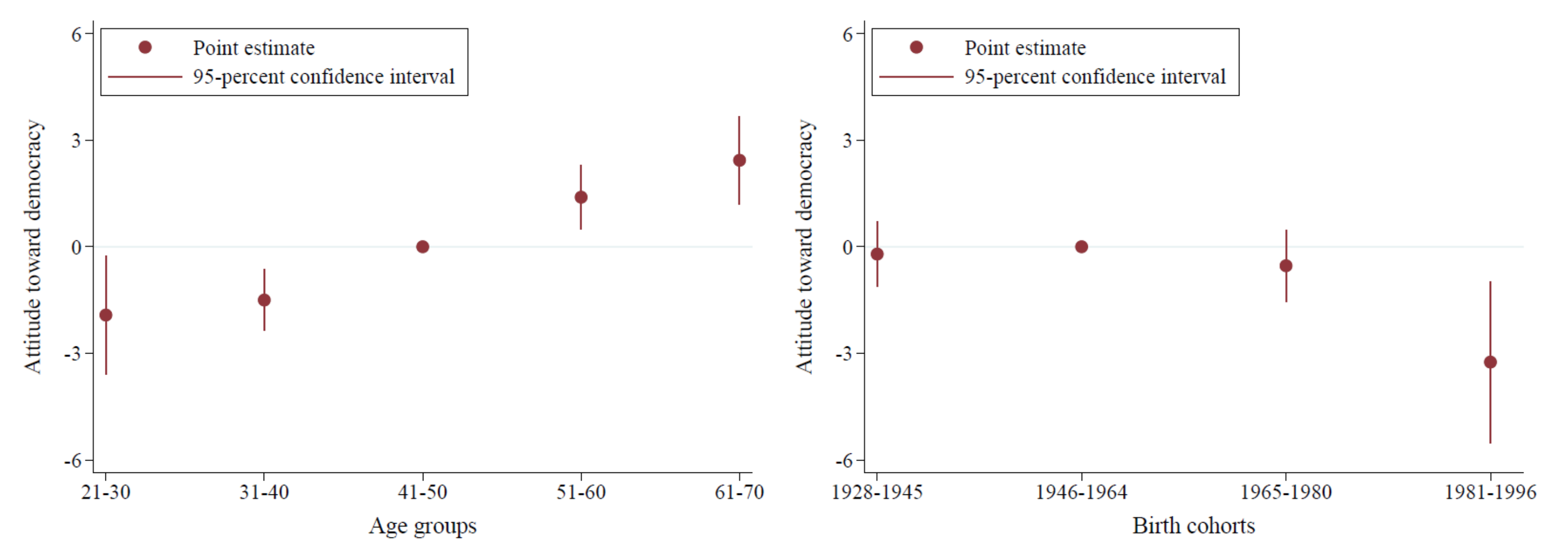


Figure 3. Demography determines democratic attitudes in Western democracies

Are These Patterns Universal?

Do age and cohort profiles differ across samples?

- Strong age profile in Western countries vs. flat profile in Eastern bloc countries
- Broadly similar cohort profiles with slight differences between East and West

Do results reflect heterogeneity in experience with democracy?

- Partly. Accounting for experience attenuates age but not cohort profiles
- Experience does not explain age profile in non-Western/Eastern bloc countries

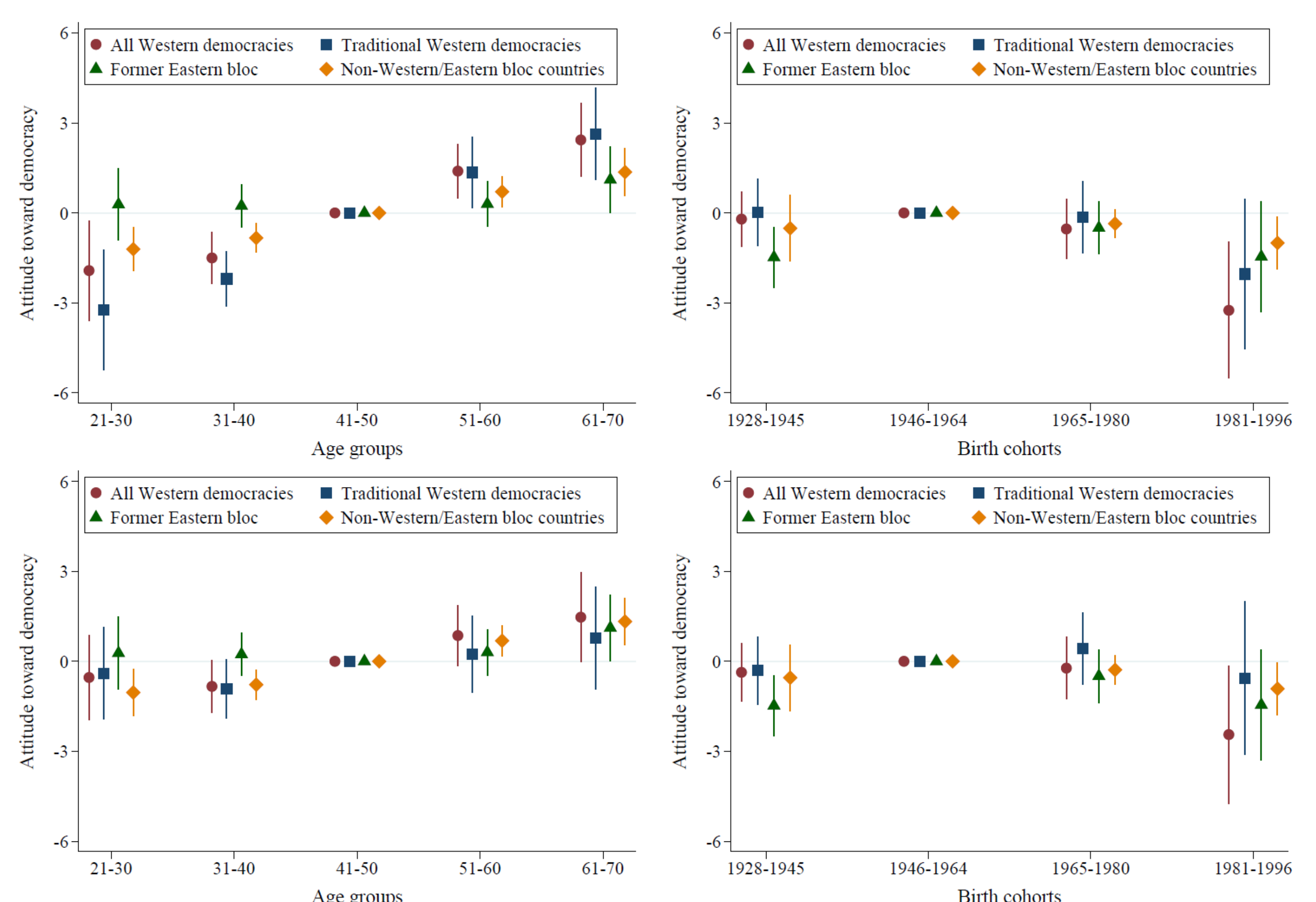


Figure 4. Age and cohort profiles across samples: Specifications in bottom panels control for experience with democracy (discounted years lived under democracy)

Contribution

Novel evidence on distinct age and cohort patterns in democratic attitudes:

- Support for democracy rises with age & varies non-monotonically across cohorts
- Age profiles differ considerably between Western and non-Western countries
- Experience with democracy explains a part, but not all, of demography’s effect
- Positive outlook: demographic change does not threaten support for democracy

Link to working paper: scan QR code

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