

ARTICLE

Trust in the Judiciary and Partisan Reactions to Judicial Checks: Evidence from Argentina

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Abstract

How do citizens evaluate the judiciary in the wake of politically salient rulings? I argue that judicial checks on the government shape citizens' attitudes about judicial institutions at large, but these effects are driven by instrumental considerations, namely partisanship. In particular, my account suggests that judicial checks – as specific instances of interbranch conflict – provide citizens with instrumental information that shapes their beliefs about the broader judiciary. Thus, I hypothesize that court rulings limiting the government's power will undermine support for the judiciary among individuals aligned with the incumbent, but increase support among opposition sympathizers. I test these expectations by exploiting the timing of two judicial decisions in Argentina (enacted by a lower court and the Supreme Court) that invalidated a highly salient judicial reform promoted by the government in 2013. Using data from a survey fielded before and after the court rulings, I show that the decisions significantly decreased government supporters' trust in the judiciary, while opposition supporters increased their trust only following the Supreme Court ruling. Moreover, suggestive evidence provides support for the mechanism proposed by my account – that judicial checks expose citizens to information that is primarily instrumental. This article contributes to our knowledge of the determinants of public support for judicial institutions involved in interbranch conflicts.

Keywords: judicial checks; public support for courts; partisanship

Introduction

Understanding why people support democratic institutions is essential to many questions about political phenomena, and research on law and courts is no exception. As scholars have recognized, public evaluation of judicial institutions plays a critical role in explaining the behavior of courts and political elites in the United States and beyond (Carrubba and Zorn 2010; Clark 2009; Helmke 2010b; Krehbiel 2016; Staton 2006; Vanberg 2001). Under the premise that public support fosters judicial independence, the last decades have witnessed significant and diverse scholarly efforts devoted to better understanding this relationship (Badas 2019; Bartels et al. 2023; Carrubba 2009; Driscoll and Nelson 2023; Gibson et al. 1998; Stephenson 2004).

But what makes citizens more prone to support judicial institutions in the first place? While extant research has examined how characteristics of both individuals and contexts

explain public evaluation of courts,¹ a fundamental aspect of our knowledge of public support for judicial institutions arises from understanding how citizens react to court decisions. In recent years, a growing body of work has explored how salient judicial decisions influence individuals' evaluation of courts (Bartels et al. 2023; Bartels and Johnston 2013; Christenson and Glick 2015a, 2015b, 2019; Nicholson and Hansford 2014). However, as this literature focuses on attitudes about specific (usually pinnacle) courts, we know little about whether and how salient rulings inform public beliefs about the judiciary writ large – that is, the broader, encompassing political institution at stake.

This is an important question to address. First, focusing on public beliefs about the judiciary as a whole helps us better understand broader, yet critical, questions in comparative politics, such as the conditions for judicial power and independence (Vanberg 2008) as well as the incentives and constraints faced by elites seeking to engage in judicial backsliding (Ahmed 2023; Haggard and Tiede 2025; Mazepus and Toshkov 2022). Second, given that judicial institutions are generally not salient to the public, citizens may well draw conclusions about the entire judicial system based on high-profile actions of high courts. Thus, to understand citizens' attitudes about the judicial branch, it is crucial to examine how citizens react to politically salient court decisions.

This article proposes an account of how publics evaluate the judiciary in the wake of judicial checks on the government, that is, salient rulings against the incumbent's interest. I argue that judicial checks affect support for judicial institutions writ large, but these effects are shaped by citizens' instrumental considerations – namely, partisanship. This is because if judicial checks are specific, salient instances of interbranch conflict, then they expose individuals to information that is fundamentally instrumental, allowing citizens to update their beliefs about the judiciary in light of such interbranch dynamics. My theory yields a main observable implication: following judicial checks on the government, we should expect incumbents' co-partisans to withdraw support from the judiciary, while opposition co-partisans should be more supportive of that institution.

I test these theoretical expectations by studying two politically salient judicial rulings released in Argentina in 2013. The decisions, enacted by a federal lower court and the national Supreme Court, invalidated a controversial judicial reform introduced by the government. Taking advantage of the fact that the 2013 *Latinobarómetro* survey was fielded before and after the courts rulings, I estimate the effect of these judicial decisions on respondents' trust in the judiciary. In line with my hypotheses, the results show that, among respondents who identified as supporters of the government, those interviewed after the rulings express less trust in the judiciary than those surveyed before the court decisions. In contrast, opposition supporters show higher levels of trust in the judiciary following the Supreme Court ruling, but not the lower court decision. These effects are substantial in magnitude and remain robust to a variety of modeling specifications. Moreover, suggestive evidence indicates that these partisan effects of the Supreme Court decision were larger among better-informed respondents. These findings provide support for the mechanism proposed by my account – that judicial checks expose individuals to information that is primarily instrumental.

This article makes several contributions. First, by theorizing a channel through which judicial behavior influences trust in the judiciary, and empirically testing this account, I contribute to current scholarship on the determinants of public support for judicial institutions writ large (Aydın-Çakır and Şekercioğlu 2016; Bühlmann and Kunz 2011; Garoupa and Magalhães 2021; Magalhães and Garoupa 2020; Salzman and Ramsey 2013). Moreover, this article provides further empirical support for the recent, but influential, literature emphasizing the instrumental foundations of citizens' support for judicial institutions (see Bartels and Johnston 2020). While this work has mostly studied the United States (Armaly 2018; Christenson and Glick 2015a), my

¹See, among others, the work of Gibson et al. (1998), Gibson and Nelson (2014), Benesh (2006), Bartels and Kramon (2020), Walker (2016), Fix et al. (2021), Salzman and Ramsey (2013), Aydın-Çakır and Şekercioğlu (2016), and Garoupa and Magalhães (2021).

empirical attention to Argentina takes the theoretical expectations of this literature to a context that is understudied but typical of the developing world.² Importantly, by focusing on *politically* salient court decisions, I am able to assess specific observable implications of instrumental theories of public support for judicial institutions involved in interbranch conflicts. Further, my emphasis on explaining public evaluations of the broader judiciary contributes to a literature that has overwhelmingly focused on the effects of judicial decisions on citizens' attitudes toward pinnacle courts (Bartels and Johnston 2013; Christenson and Glick 2015a).

Second, this article speaks to the larger literature on comparative judicial politics and the separation of powers. While a large amount of past research has advanced our knowledge about the conditions under which courts engage in interpower conflicts (Bill Chávez 2004; Carrubba et al. 2008; Couso 2003; Helmke 2002; Hilbink 2007; Iaryczower et al. 2002), a subset of this literature has explained the role of public support in such instances (Helmke 2010b; Helmke and Staton 2011; Pereira 2022; J Staton et al. 2022; Staton 2006). Yet, to my knowledge, no prior work in comparative politics has empirically examined whether and how specific, real-world instances of interbranch dispute – particularly judicial checks on the government – can influence public attitudes about the judiciary writ large. That judicial challenges of incumbents can trigger heterogeneous partisan reactions among the citizenry has crucial implications for our understanding of the role of public support amid interpower dynamics (Carrubba 2009; Krehbiel 2016, 2019; Staton 2006; Vanberg 2001) and raises new questions about the strategic behavior of both courts and elected officials. More broadly, my findings underscoring partisan reactions to judicial checks speak to contemporary debates on citizens' support for checks-and-balances institutions and democratic principles (Graham and MW Svulik 2020; Mazepus and Toshkov 2022; Singer 2018; M Svulik 2020).

This article proceeds as follows. In the next section, I discuss the related literature and motivate my theoretical expectations. Section 3 describes the context this article studies and its identification strategy. Section 4 presents the main results, while Section 5 address concerns over unobserved cofounders. Section 6 discusses preliminary and suggestive evidence about the mechanism at play. Section 7 concludes by identifying avenues for future research.

Court Rulings and Public Support for the Judiciary

To endure and ensure their efficacy, all democratic institutions require some degree of support from the public. If disapproved by a sufficient number of citizens, institutions are feeble and rendered impotent to achieve their goals. Lacking the 'purse and the sword', public support is particularly important for judicial institutions. As scholars have long recognized, citizens' backing of courts nourishes autonomous judicial power (cf. Bartels 2024; Caldeira 1987; Murphy and Tanenhaus 1968; Staton 2010), a condition for judicial institutions willing to provide meaningful checks on incumbents' transgression of their constitutional authority (Gibson et al. 1998; Vanberg 2005).

However, judicial review of governmental action is risky business for many courts around the world. When judges are called to place a check on other branches, they expand their province of jurisdiction (Vallinder 1995), venturing into deciding on issues politically sensitive to sitting, powerful officials. Critically, such involvement has the potential to expose courts to interbranch conflicts, including attacks on judicial institutions (Helmke 2010b; Vanberg 2015).

Consider, for instance, some anecdotal examples of this phenomenon across various political and institutional contexts, which reveal the relationship between courts' independent decision making and incumbents' backlash. Vanberg (2000) documents how West Germany's Chancellor Adenauer publicly threatened disobeying a Constitutional Court's decision against the government and even considered institutional changes to the judicial institution. Similarly,

²But see Bartels and Kramon (2020) and Bartels et al. (2023) for notable exceptions.

upon a series of Supreme Court rulings invalidating pieces of the ‘New Deal’, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt responded with his infamous court-packing plan (Caldeira 1987). More recently, the Israeli Supreme Court struck down key government policies, thus accelerating government efforts to overhaul the judiciary (Braman et al. 2025; Kershner 2023). In 2023, the Argentinian president initiated a formal impeachment process against all the Supreme Court Justices – a decision that was motivated by recent Supreme Court rulings against the interests of the national government (Lau Alberdi 2024; Reuters 2023).

Regardless of whether these anecdotal attempts to retaliate against independent judicial decision making were successful or not, the fact that these interbranch dynamics occur frequently (and even in environments where courts are broadly respected) raises some important questions. If public support is critical for judicial institutions, can citizens become bulwarks of judicial independence when governments attack courts for their decisions? More specifically, *how do citizens evaluate the judiciary in the wake of court rulings that are salient to incumbents?*

While the question of ‘how specific judicial decisions map onto public opinion’ (Helmke 2010a, 397) has been widely studied in the literature,³ existing work explores the effects of judicial rulings on public attitudes about specific (usually pinnacle) courts. Yet this approach leaves understudied any impact that these decisions may have on citizens’ evaluation of the judiciary as the broader, encompassing political institution at stake. This gap is all the more relevant as the public’s assessment of high court decisions could serve as a basis for their views on the judiciary as a whole. Examining whether and how these ‘spill-over’ effects occur, then, is critical to gain a full understanding of the public-based sources of judicial legitimacy (Easton 1975; Gibson et al. 1998), a pre-requisite for the exercise of judicial power (Bartels 2024; Staton 2010; Vanberg 2005). In the next section, I propose an account of public support for the judiciary, which brings together scholarship on public opinion about judicial institutions writ large and literature studying the effects of court rulings.

Partisan Reactions to Judicial Checks

Given the centrality of public support for judicial power, a great deal of attention has been devoted to understanding the determinants of citizens’ evaluation of the broader, encompassing judicial institution at stake (for example, the ‘judiciary’, ‘legal system’, or ‘courts of law’). Existing work shows that individual-level characteristics – such as awareness, knowledge, partisanship, and experience with courts – help explain variation in public trust in such institutions (Bartels and Kramon 2020; Benesh 2006).

Yet, context matters. The properties of judicial institutions play a crucial role in explaining citizens’ trust in the judiciary writ large (Bühlmann and Kunz 2011; De Micheli and Taylor 2024; Driscoll et al. 2024; Fix et al. 2021; Salzman and Ramsey 2013; Walker 2016). These institutional indicators – such as the levels of judicial independence, judicial accountability, or democracy – matter because they proxy for the actual behavior and strategic environment of courts. This judicial behavior, in turn, becomes critical information for citizens evaluating the broader judiciary. Indeed, scholars have argued that public trust in the judiciary is higher among ‘citizens living in countries with well-performing judiciaries’ (Salzman and Ramsey 2013, 76) or where ‘courts and judges perform well or behave independently from any external political influences’ (Aydın-Çakır and Şekercioğlu 2016, 636).

This rationale that judicial behavior informs public beliefs about the judiciary has underpinned the theoretical foundation for comparative research showing that institutional and contextual factors moderate the effect of individual-level features on attitudes about judicial institutions (Staton 2010, chaps 5–6; Gandur et al. 2025). For example, scholars have argued that increased

³See, for example, Bartels et al. (2023), Bartels and Johnston (2013), Christenson and Glick (2015b, 2019), Grosskopf and Mondak (1998), and Mondak (1990, 1991).

knowledge and awareness about courts leads to better evaluations of the judiciary *only* where levels of judicial independence, accountability, and democracy are higher. In contrast, in contexts where courts perform badly, non-independently, or are politically constrained, knowing more about these institutions leads to more *negative* views about the judiciary (Aydın-Çakır and Şekercioğlu 2016; Garoupa and Magalhães 2021; Salzman and Ramsey 2013; Staton 2010). The key idea is that public trust in the broader judicial institutions is a function of citizens' reaction to how courts *actually behave*: where tribunals perform as they should, publics increase their assessment of the judiciary (Bühlmann and Kunz 2011).

In line with previous work, I suggest that judicial behavior influences evaluations of the broader judiciary. Yet, my argument deviates from existing scholarship in two ways. On the one hand, I focus on specific instances of interbranch conflicts – judicial checks by which courts limit incumbents' power on salient cases, an institutional feature that has received little attention. Such an approach, I suggest, is better suited to assess whether and how courts' behavior explains variation in citizens' trust in the judiciary (for example, Magalhães and Garoupa 2020). On the other hand, my account differs from previous work in that I relax the assumption that individuals hold homogeneous and uniform perceptions of judicial behavior. Instead, I suggest that individuals vary in how they react to instances of judicial checks, and identifying the sources of such variation helps us understand citizens' attitudes about the broader judicial institutions in the wake of judicial checks.

My account theorizes one channel through which judicial behavior affects support for judicial institutions writ large. I argue that courts' politically salient decisions influence public trust in the judiciary, but this effect is fundamentally shaped by citizens' *instrumental* considerations, in particular partisanship. I suggest that these considerations dominate because of the salient nature of interbranch conflicts, where the information about courts that citizens are exposed to is primarily instrumental.

This argument builds upon two claims. First, recent work both in the United States and beyond has demonstrated that public attitudes about courts are endogenous to citizens' instrumental concerns – that is, individuals evaluate judicial institutions more positively when courts advance their partisan or ideological interests (Bartels and Johnston 2013). In particular, scholars have demonstrated that partisan preferences and support for the government shape how individuals evaluate judicial institutions (Bartels and Kramon 2020, 2022; Driscoll et al. 2024), and that these considerations also drive public reactions to court rulings (Bartels et al. 2023; Christenson and Glick 2015a; Nicholson and Hansford 2014).

My second claim relates to *why* partisanship matters when evaluating judicial decisions. Scholars have suggested different mechanisms underlying the 'effect' of partisanship on public responses to salient court rulings. Under Bartels and Kramon's (2020) partisan alignment theory, citizens want courts to attain partisan political advantages, with government (opposition) co-partisans being less (more) likely to support courts' power to constrain executive power. Some work emphasizes the role of citizens' attitudes about the substantive policy reviewed by courts (Christenson and Glick 2019; see also Carrubba 2009; Stephenson 2004), which is likely to be correlated with partisanship. Other scholars highlight the role of party cues, where citizens take into consideration the political preferences of their leaders when evaluating judicial institutions (Armaly 2018; Clark and Kastellec 2015). Finally, judicial decisions can also inform individuals about the ideological tenor of the ruling court (Bartels and Johnston 2013), a strong predictor of party identification.

This article suggests an alternative account. When it comes to evaluation of judicial institutions writ large, I argue that instances of interbranch conflicts provide citizens with information that is essentially instrumental. That is, politically salient judicial checks help individuals better understand the *political*

alignment of judicial institutions relative to the government.⁴ We have reasons to believe that this form of interpower dynamics prompts individuals to update their beliefs about judicial institutions at large. First, not only can judicial checks on the government draw courts into conflict with incumbents, but they also increase the visibility of judicial institutions (Gibson et al. 2003b; Grosskopf and Mondak 1998; Krehbiel 2021), which tend to be largely overlooked by the public (Bowal and Wanke 2001; Gibson et al. 1998). Thus, we can expect sudden spikes in public attention to significantly impact citizens' attitudes toward the judiciary, at least in the short term.⁵

Moreover, even when judicial checks come from *specific* courts, this information can shape citizens' assessment of the judiciary writ large. Research suggests that experiences with particular courts may influence individuals' evaluation of general to broader judicial institutions (Glavina and van Zimmeren 2025; Montinola 2009). If these local experiences are informative to citizens' opinion about the judiciary, then the information that salient judicial checks provide may well impact such public attitudes as well.

In sum, how courts behave and perform is crucial to understanding public evaluations of judicial institutions writ large (Aydın-Çakır and Şekercioğlu 2016; Bühlmann and Kunz 2011; Garoupa and Magalhães 2021). I argue that specific instances of courts challenging incumbents will have heterogeneous effects on public support for the judiciary: supporters of the government will react negatively towards judicial checks, and those politically opposed to the government will praise courts' limits on the power of the incumbent. If this logic is sound, court rulings that impose a check on the incumbent will decrease trust in the judiciary among individuals that are politically aligned with the government, whereas such judicial checks will increase trust among those politically identified with the opposition. This rationale suggests the following hypotheses:

HYPOTHESIS 1 (H1): *Exposure to court decisions against the incumbent will decrease trust in the judiciary among government supporters.*

HYPOTHESIS 2 (H2): *Exposure to court decisions against the incumbent will increase trust in the judiciary among opposition supporters.*

Moreover, if politically salient judicial checks provide information about the alignment of courts relative to the government, the partisan reactions to court decisions will increase as citizens become better informed and more politically aware. This leads to the following hypothesis:

HYPOTHESIS 3 (H3): *The partisan reactions to court decisions against the incumbent will be larger among better informed and more politically aware citizens.*

⁴Note that these instrumentally driven attitudes are likely to dominate even if we assume that court decisions *also* expose citizens to information about judicial impartiality or principled decision-making (Gibson et al. 2003b; Staton 2010). For example, the experimental evidence presented by Nicholson and Hansford (2014) indicates that 'partisan' images of the US Supreme Court substantially affect public acceptance of its decisions; in contrast, 'legal' images do not have a consistent or substantive effect on the public. Moreover, Magalhães et al. (2023) show that judicial decisions depicted as being motivated by policy goals do *not* undermine public perceptions of fairness compared to 'legalistic' framings. Finally, recent research has documented *policy-driven* variation over how citizens evaluate legal principles (Rivero and Stone 2023), and even over which court decisions individuals actually perceive as legal or apolitical (Gadarian and Strother 2023). Together, this scholarship suggests that even if individuals care about intrinsic or value-based considerations, such as impartiality or principled decision-making, these concerns may well be driven by instrumental motivations (see, Driscoll et al. 2025).

⁵In many – if not most – cases, the public learns about judicial checks through the media. This makes media coverage of court rulings especially important for public opinion on courts (see Baird and Gangl 2006; Christenson and Glick 2015a; Hitt and Searles 2018; Magalhães et al. 2023), as it shapes the information politically aware citizens receive. While a comprehensive analysis of how media coverage of judicial checks influences support for the judiciary is beyond the scope of this article, Section 6 and Supporting Information (SI) I discuss, and empirically examine, the relationship between media framing and political awareness within the context of this study. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this important point.

Research Design

Context: The 2013 Reform of the Argentinian Judicial Council

During the opening of the legislative year in March of 2013, Argentina's President Cristina Fernández announced a series of judicial reform bills to be sent to Congress – reforms whose overall goal was to 'democratize the judiciary', but that most opposition groups saw as an attempt to undermine judicial independence and pack the federal judiciary (Elias 2015; Llanos 2014). The most controversial reform involved substantial modifications to the Argentinian Judicial Council, an interbranch constitutional body that has played a crucial role in the selection and removal of federal lower court judges since 1998 (Bill Chávez 2007; Elias 2015; Walsh 2020). The Judicial Council is composed of members that represent Congress and the executive, as well as federal judges, attorneys, and the academic community throughout the country.

Although the Argentinian Constitution establishes *which* groups and institutions are to be represented in the Judicial Council (Congress, executive, judges, attorneys, and academics), a law by Congress determines the *exact* number of members and *how* those members are chosen to serve in the Council. Prior to the 2013 reforms, the Judicial Council had thirteen members.⁶ While the executive and Congress selected their members to the Council, the representatives of judges, attorneys, and academics were chosen through elections in which only their peers (that is, other sitting federal judges, licensed attorneys, and academics, respectively) were allowed to vote.

On 8 May, 2013, with the support of parties aligned with the executive – and the disapproval of opposition parties – the Argentinian Congress passed the government's bill to reform the Judicial Council. The reform increased the number of representatives of attorneys (from two to three) and academics (from one to six) on the Judicial Council. Moreover, the new law changed the selection method of the representatives of judges, attorneys, and academics, who would now be subject to popular elections – and not chosen by their peers exclusively, as before. Also, the reform required that candidates for these seats are affiliated with a political party. After the Judicial Council reform was passed, President Fernández issued an executive order that called for elections of representatives of judges, attorneys, and academics to be carried out during the mid-term primary legislative elections in August 2013.⁷

The reform of the Judicial Council was broadly controversial, triggering criticism from political actors opposed to the government and even legal challenges to the new law. In particular, a 'list' (for example, party) of candidates running for attorney seats in the Judicial Council filed a lawsuit questioning the constitutional validity of the judicial reform and requested the suspension of the elections for representatives of judges, attorneys, and academics.⁸ On 11 June, a lower district court judge ruled that the reform of the Judicial Council was in conflict with Argentina's Constitution. The judge also invalidated the call for elections concerning the representatives of judges, attorneys, and academics that the President had issued via executive order. In response, the government filed a direct appeal to the Argentinian Supreme Court, who released its decision on 18 June.⁹ The Supreme Court's ruling upheld the lower judge's opinion, therefore striking down the Judicial Council reform and suspending the call for elections for Judicial Council

⁶Specifically, there were six legislators (three Deputies and three Senators), one representative of the Executive, three federal judges, two attorneys representing licensed law practitioners throughout the country, and one professor representing the academic community.

⁷SI B2 reproduces the Constitutional provision on the Judicial Council and summarizes the relevant changes introduced by the 2013 reform.

⁸The case name is 'Rizzo, Jorge Gabriel (apoderado Lista 3 Gente de Derecho) s/ acción de amparo c/ Poder Ejecutivo Nacional, ley 26.855, medida cautelar (Expte. N° 3034/13)'.

⁹Formally, this Supreme Court decision is cited as 'CSJN, Fallos 336:760.' The full text of the ruling is available at <https://sjco.nulta.csjn.gov.ar/sjconsulta/documentos/verDocumentoByIdLinksJP.html?idDocumento=7026851>. See also the report from the Supreme Court's Center for Judicial Information (CII) at www.cij.gov.ar/nota-11694-La-Corte-declar-inconstitucional-cambios-en-el-Consejo-de-la-Magistratura.html [www.perma.cc/ACZ2-PBWE].

representatives. These series of court rulings became known as the Rizzo decisions, given the plaintiff's last name.

These two judicial decisions had widespread media coverage. SI [B3](#) shows that the three mainstream Argentinian newspapers featured *both* the lower court and Supreme Court decisions on their front cover the day after the rulings. More importantly, this media coverage evidenced the heightened partisan acrimony of the debates around the judicial decisions. In particular, government officials largely criticized the rulings, while opposition leaders applauded the court decisions. For instance, the then Chief of Staff characterized the Supreme Court ruling as an 'affront to the Argentinian people', considering it 'inconceivable that, after 30 years of our democracy, some institutions still maintain a retrograde vision, typical of other centuries' (Télam [2013a](#)).¹⁰ In contrast, the House leader of the main opposition party asserted that 'the Supreme Court acted with honesty and judgmental independence, and it invalidated the [government's] attempt to subjugate the Judiciary' (Clarín [2013](#)). The lower court ruling triggered similar reactions among actors from the government and opposition parties (see LaNación [2013](#); Página12 [2013](#)).¹¹

Furthermore, both the lower court and Supreme Court decisions were highly salient to the larger citizenry, as Figure [1](#) indicates. The figure plots Google Trends data on search activity in Argentina for the term 'Judicial Council' (*Consejo de la Magistratura*) from March to June 2013 and shows that interest in the Judicial Council increased as it became politically salient. Importantly, the data also show that search activity on the Judicial Council increased notably following the lower and Supreme Court rulings (11 June and 18 June, respectively). In sum, Figure [1](#) suggests that Argentines were responsive to the political events surrounding the reform of the Judicial Council – including the court rulings in June – and provides evidence that the judicial decisions were salient to the general public.

The 2013 Latinobarómetro Survey in Argentina

While these political events were taking place in Argentina, the *Latinobarómetro Corporation* was interviewing individuals for their 2013 nationally representative survey.¹² The survey was fielded from 1 June to 30 June, and it interviewed a total of 1,200 Argentinian respondents. Figure [2](#) displays the distribution of respondents throughout June 2013 as well as the dates the lower and Supreme Court rulings were released.

Importantly, the Latinobarómetro survey included a four-point scale that asked respondents how much trust they had in the judiciary: 'a lot', 'some', 'a little', or 'no' trust. While this and similar items have been widely used in comparative courts and public opinion (Aydın-Çakır and Şekercioğlu [2016](#); Bühlmann and Kunz [2011](#); De Micheli and Taylor [2024](#); Fix et al. [2021](#); Helmke [2010a](#); Salzman and Ramsey [2013](#); Walker [2016](#)), there are two main concerns about this measure. On the one hand, a rich literature studying support for individual courts has raised concerns about using trust items to measure citizens' enduring loyalty toward judicial institutions. While

¹⁰Even President Fernández implicitly criticized the Supreme Court while giving a speech at a public event that took place two days after the ruling: she claimed that 'rather sooner than later, Argentines will be able to vote democratically for *all* the political bodies of the Argentine Constitution' (Notarfrancesco [2013](#)).

¹¹Before the 11 June decision, other judges around the country had issued rulings either striking down or upholding the judicial reform. Some of these rulings were enacted before the Latinobarómetro survey (Télam [2013b](#)) and are therefore controlled by design; the other five lower-court rulings were issued between 4 June and 7 June (Hauser [2013](#)). Nonetheless, those specific decisions did not have widespread media coverage (especially relative to the 11 June and 18 June rulings) and were rarely commented on by political leaders, making it unlikely that respondents were exposed to judicial decisions other than the Rizzo rulings. Even if respondents were indeed exposed to those other rulings, this would bias *against* the effect of the Rizzo decisions under study. In SI [G1](#), I follow the recommendation by Muñoz et al. ([2020](#)) and show that there were no preexisting time trends unrelated to the Rizzo rulings.

¹²Corporación Latinobarómetro, Santiago, Chile, www.latinobarometro.org.

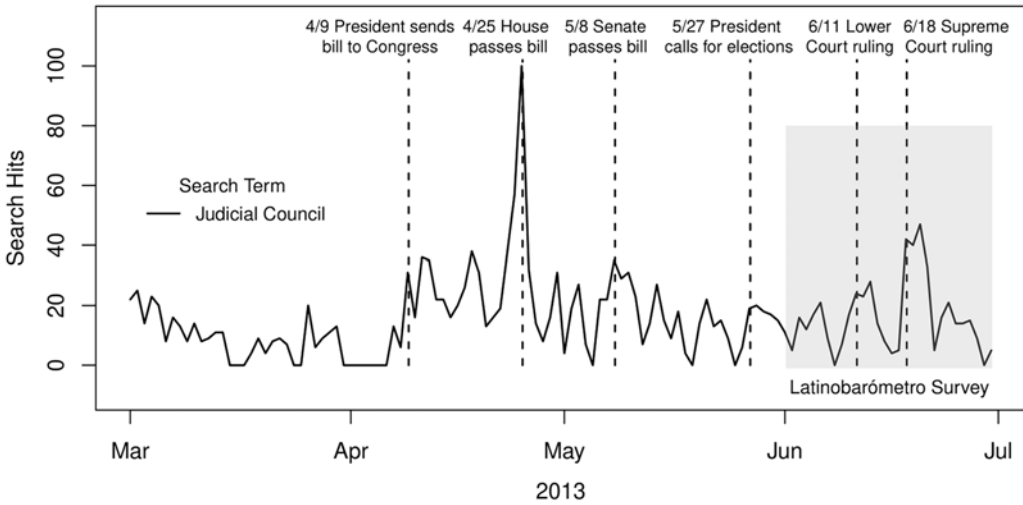


Figure 1. Google trends search activity.

Note: The figure uses Google Trends data to plot search interest in the term 'Judicial Council' (*Consejo de la Magistratura*). The data were obtained using the gtrendsR package in R (Massicotte and Eddebuettel 2022). See SI B4 for more information on how Google Trends collects and measures search activity.

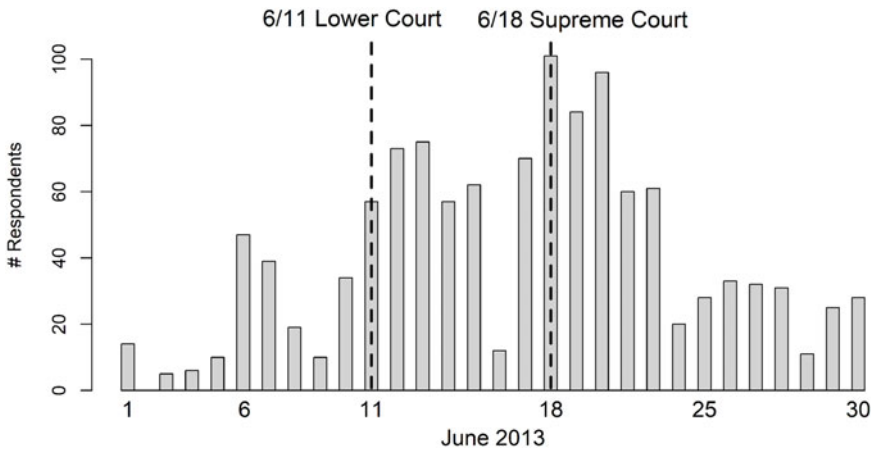


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents during the 2013 Latinobarómetro survey.

Note: The figure shows the distribution of Latinobarómetro respondents by date of interview. The dashed lines mark the date of the lower court and Supreme Court rulings.

I acknowledge the shortcomings of employing this item relative to measures of diffuse support or legitimacy, it is a valid outcome for this article's purposes. First, since debates around trust items have been theoretically and empirically circumscribed to attitudes about specific, pinnacle courts (Gibson et al. 2003b; Gibson and Nelson 2015), the extent to which criticism toward these items applied to evaluation of broader judicial institutions is not clear. Second, even if these concerns apply to the outcome examined in this article, scholars have suggested that trust items reflect 'a blend of short-term and long-term judgments of the institution' (Gibson et al. 2003a, 364; see also

Driscoll and Nelson 2018). This implies that trust measures, albeit limited, still offer valuable insights into the public's meaningful beliefs about judicial institutions.¹³

On the other hand, this measure raises questions about the extent to which respondents are expressing their attitudes about the judiciary writ large, rather than the individual courts involved in the political events surrounding the 2013 Latinobarómetro survey in Argentina.¹⁴ While data and design limitations prevent me from fully ruling out this possibility, SI J addresses the concern in greater detail, where I present theoretical arguments and empirical evidence supporting the view that Latinobarómetro's trust question reflects citizens' beliefs about the broader judicial institution.¹⁵ In any case, readers should keep in mind that the outcome measure may partially reflect spillover from court-specific evaluations.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the *Trust in the Judiciary* survey item, which I use as the outcome variable in the analyses. For simplicity, I employ the binary version, where 0 means a respondent had a little or no trust in the judiciary, and 1 reflects a lot or some trust.¹⁶

Taking advantage of the fact that the rulings were released while Latinobarómetro was in the field, I can split the sample of respondents into three 'quasi-experimental' groups: a 'control' condition (respondents interviewed on or before 11 June) and two 'treatment' conditions (respondents interviewed between 12 June and 18 June, and respondents interviewed on or after 19 June).¹⁷

Partisanship indicator

The survey also included information about interviewees' partisanship. In the analyses below, I employ the indicator *Government supporter* to denote whether a respondent is a supporter of a party aligned with the government or a supporter of an opposition party.¹⁸ While this measurement approach drops respondents without any partisan identification and thus reduces

¹³In addition, theoretical debates and measures of diffuse support or legitimacy for the judiciary writ large (rather than individual tribunals) are scant (Bartels 2024; Gibson 2006). To the best of my knowledge, only Bartels and colleagues discuss a legitimacy-related measure for the broader judicial institution, which they call 'support for judicial power' (Bartels et al. 2023; Bartels and Kramon 2020).

¹⁴I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

¹⁵Specifically, SI J substantiates three key takeaways. First, existing literature on institutional trust suggests that Latinobarómetro's *Trust in the Judiciary* item captures a concept related to 'system trust' (confidence in the broader judicial institution), conceptually distinct from 'organizational trust' (trust in specific courts) (Glavina and van Zimmeren 2025). Second, pairwise correlations suggest that trust in the judiciary and trust in specific courts are related, but not perfectly collinear. Finally, analyses show that attitudes toward democracy, the political system, and executive approval predict trust in both specific courts and the broader judiciary, yet only the latter correlates with individuals' interactions with the justice system. This last finding supports the view that Latinobarómetro's trust item reflects system-level beliefs.

¹⁶Results are robust to employing the original ordinal measure or a (scaled) continuous version of this outcome (see SI F2).

¹⁷Newspapers reported the rulings in the night of 11 June (lower court decision) and the evening of 18 June (Supreme Court decision). Nevertheless, removing respondents interviewed on 11 June and 18 June does not substantially affect the results (see SI F4).

¹⁸To construct this partisanship indicator, I employ the Latinobarómetro survey item denoting which political party respondents 'belong to': 'government', 'opposition', or 'other/party not mentioned' (see documentation at <https://www.latinobarometro.org/latContents.jsp>). Although it is not explicitly stated in the Latinobarómetro documentation, this item is constructed from respondents' answer to the question 'If elections were held this Sunday, which party would you vote for?' (see list of parties in SI A3). While this measure could potentially suffer from post-treatment bias (Acharya et al. 2016), such a scenario is unlikely. First, balance tests show that the conditions are balanced on the partisanship indicator (see Table 1), which suggests that the rulings did not influence respondents' vote intention. Second, that court outputs shape voting behavior is inconsistent with theoretical and empirical research demonstrating that voters consider more salient factors (such as partisanship, policy issue positions, or economic performance) when casting their ballot for a given candidate. Relative to these more weighty considerations, judicial matters constitute a low-salience issue – topics on which voters tend to rely on partisan cues (Downs 1957; Mummolo et al. 2021). Moreover, Driscoll and Nelson (2023) show that, when voters are provided with information on candidates' issue positions, vote choice is practically unaffected by candidates' attempts to undermine judicial institutions.

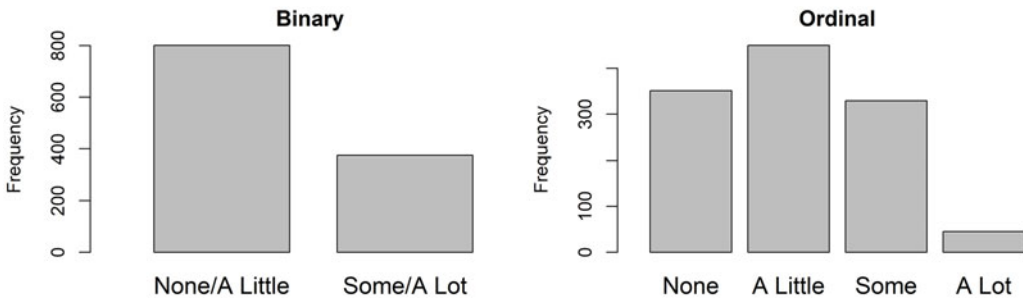


Figure 3. Trust in the judiciary.

Note: The panels show the distribution of the binary and ordinal measures of the outcome (*Trust in the Judiciary*) across Latinobarómetro respondents.

the sample size considerably (see SI A3 and SI H), the resulting partisanship indicator has the advantage of identifying those unequivocally aligned with or opposed to the government, which is a fundamental component of theories of partisan support for judicial institutions (cf. Bartels and Kramon 2020, 2022).

SI H presents analyses that include ‘non-partisan’ supporters. The results reveal three main takeaways: the main findings are robust to the inclusion of non-partisans, the effects of the rulings are generally greatest in magnitude among both government and opposition supporters, and non-partisans significantly *decrease* their trust following the Rizzo decisions. SI H discusses these findings in detail and offers a potential explanation for the negative effect among non-partisan respondents based on the literature on judicial impartiality and the myth of legality.

Identification strategy

The timing of both the invalidation of the Judicial Council reform and the Latinobarómetro survey offers an unusual opportunity to estimate the partisan reactions to the court decisions, as measured by Latinobarómetro respondents’ expressed trust in the judiciary. My identification strategy exploits the fact that the Rizzo decisions were independent of the survey fieldwork, thus assigning pre- and post-Rizzo respondents as if randomly (Muñoz et al. 2020). Yet, the Latinobarómetro survey could have been administered in a way that citizens more or less prone to support the judiciary were systematically interviewed before or after the court decisions, making treated and control units fundamentally different.¹⁹ For instance, since the nationally representative survey was not conducted simultaneously around the country, it is plausible that demographically dissimilar provinces, cities, or neighborhoods were surveyed earlier or later in the process. Indeed, although most provinces and cities have respondents in both the control or treatment groups, there are some regions that were interviewed only before or after the lower or Supreme Court rulings (see SI AI).²⁰ To make credible claims, however, this research design requires Latinobarómetro respondents surveyed before the rulings to be comparable to those interviewed in the days following the rulings – otherwise, changes in trust in the judiciary could be

¹⁹Alternatively, the timing of the decisions could have been driven by judges’ attempt to maximize its support among those interviewed by the survey. If that were the case, treatment assignment would not be ‘as-if’ random, but driven by the strategic calculation of the courts. However, it is highly unlikely that the (lower and Supreme Court) judges knew about the 2013 Latinobarómetro survey at all, let alone the timeline of the survey administration. Moreover, the timing of the Rizzo decisions was not in full control of the judges, as the legal processes depended also on the actions of plaintiffs and defendants (that is, the filing of the lawsuit).

²⁰SI F5 and F6 show that the results are substantially similar when running the analyses only on respondents from cities with observations both before and after the rulings.

an artifact of differences in other individual-level characteristics, rather than the court rulings' effects.²¹

To check for balance across groups, I use presumably pre-treatment survey items asked in the 2013 Latinobarómetro poll.²² Table 1 displays mean values, standard deviations, and exact *p*-values using randomization inference tests (Young 2019). Although the groups seem fairly balanced, the table shows that there is imbalance with respect to respondents' education (more educated in treatment groups), SES (the 'Very good' category is more frequent in the treatment groups), and subjective income (higher in the lower court condition). Such imbalances are potentially problematic because research has shown that political sophistication and education are associated with support for courts (Benesh 2006; Fix et al. 2021). To deal with this concern and achieve balance across groups, the analyses presented below also employ (1) entropy weights (Hainmueller 2012) and, alternatively, (2) weights generated by genetic matching (Diamond and Sekhon 2013; Sekhon 2011). These methods help mitigate model dependency and improve balance, ensuring that the results are not driven by differences in *observable* covariates. Moreover, the matching specifications (which allow for matching with replacement and multiple matched control observations) employ a larger sample, which helps alleviate concerns over statistical power. These strategies rely on the *conditional ignorability assumption* (Muñoz et al. 2020): that conditional on a set of (observable) covariates related to how the Latinobarómetro survey was fielded, the rulings are independent of respondents' potential outcomes (see also Casas et al. 2024). These methods address threats raised by observables; Section 5 discusses analyses that tackle the concern that *unobservables* are confounding my findings.

While in studying the effects of salient judicial rulings I follow previous work,²³ my research design has the advantage of studying attitudes about the judiciary without the need to prime respondents about the court decisions – which may potentially introduce bias in respondents' evaluation of the judiciary (see Grosskopf and Mondak 1998, 650; Hitt et al. 2019, 37).²⁴ Moreover, by exploiting real-world judicial rulings, this design achieves greater external validity as compared to survey and laboratory experiments that expose individuals to hypothetical court decisions (Bartels and Johnston 2013; Mondak 1990, 1991).²⁵

These methodological features make this article well-suited to examine both whether courts' behavior influences public evaluation of judicial institutions writ large, and whether such attitudes are driven by citizens' instrumental concerns. To the extent that my theoretical expectations with respect to these questions apply broadly, Argentina is an excellent case to empirically focus on. As SI B1 shows, Argentina is a representative case according to a number of institutional and public opinion indicators both historically as well as in 2013. The country's interbranch environment and levels of support for courts have been typical in comparative perspective, outside the oft-studied

²¹To account for regional-level differences, the statistical models include province (or city) fixed effects.

²²See SI A2 for more information on these survey items. The main results are robust to employing an extensive set of (potentially post-treatment) covariates (see SI F8).

²³For instance, past research has studied the impact of actual, salient court decisions on public attitudes about both the ruling tribunal (Bartels et al. 2023; Christenson and Glick 2019; Gibson et al. 2003b) and policy issues (Casas et al. 2024; Christenson and Glick 2015b; Hoekstra 1995; Hoekstra and Segal 1996).

²⁴Even though I am not able to empirically determine whether the Latinobarómetro respondents had the rulings in mind when being asked about their trust in the judiciary, Figure 1 provides evidence that the Judicial Council reform was salient during the survey period and especially so after the court decisions. Moreover, SI B4 shows that search interest in the last name of the lower court judge and in the Supreme Court increased right after the 11 June and 18 June rulings, respectively. It is very plausible, then, that 'treated' respondents were aware of the judicial rulings at the time of the Latinobarómetro interview.

²⁵This article's design and substance is most similar to Bartels et al. (2023), who examine the effect of a ruling from Kenya's Supreme Court – upholding the results of the 2017 presidential elections and allowing the incumbent's re-election – on respondents' support for judicial power. While these authors employ panel data, my design is limited by the cross-sectional nature of the Latinobarómetro data and thus estimates between-subject change. However, whereas Bartels et al. (2023) study a court decision in favor of the incumbent in an electoral autocracy, this article examines the invalidation of a democratic government's policy.

Table 1. Covariate balance across conditions

	Control		Lower C.		Supreme C.		(exact) <i>p</i> -value	
	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	Lower v. control	Supreme v. control
Government supporter	0.782	0.415	0.724	0.448	0.741	0.439	0.288	0.457
Age	44.356	0.5	43.281	0.499	43.356	0.501	0.615	0.636
Female	0.455	16.431	0.449	17.838	0.5	17.116	0.913	0.476
Education	4.208	1.444	4.551	1.371	4.575	1.495	0.049	0.049
SES								
Bad/very bad	0.069	0.255	0.059	0.237	0.063	0.244	0.741	0.846
Not bad	0.426	0.497	0.341	0.475	0.31	0.464	0.157	0.053
Good	0.485	0.502	0.508	0.501	0.471	0.501	0.714	0.827
very good	0.02	0.14	0.092	0.29	0.155	0.363	0.018	0.001
Subjective Income								
Insufficient and problems	0.059	0.238	0.032	0.178	0.046	0.21	0.288	0.646
Insufficient	0.327	0.471	0.2	0.401	0.236	0.426	0.018	0.102
Just sufficient	0.535	0.501	0.665	0.473	0.575	0.496	0.03	0.526
Sufficient and save	0.079	0.271	0.103	0.304	0.144	0.352	0.521	0.118
Class								
Lower	0.099	0.3	0.054	0.227	0.144	0.352	0.16	0.288
Middle-lower	0.337	0.475	0.422	0.495	0.351	0.479	0.161	0.815
Middle	0.515	0.502	0.481	0.501	0.466	0.5	0.588	0.43
Middle-upper	0.05	0.218	0.043	0.204	0.04	0.197	0.824	0.716
Religion								
Agnostic/atheist/none/NA	0.089	0.286	0.146	0.354	0.138	0.346	0.172	0.234
Catholic	0.822	0.385	0.8	0.401	0.741	0.439	0.653	0.125
Evangelical	0.069	0.255	0.038	0.191	0.075	0.264	0.246	0.872
Other	0.02	0.14	0.016	0.127	0.046	0.21	0.836	0.273
<i>N</i>	101		185		174			

Note: The table shows means and exact *p*-values (Young 2019) using randomization inference tests with 100,000 random samples.

environments of the United States and Western Europe. In particular, SI **B1.1** suggests that overall levels of judicial independence, government compliance with court orders, and democracy in Argentina have been typical of most countries around the world, falling between those of more consolidated democracies and those in the developing world. Similarly, public opinion data indicate that average trust in the Argentinian judiciary has been close to the mean and median values across Latin American countries (see SI **B1.2**).

Results

Table 2 presents the results of fitting linear probability models of the relationship between the court rulings and trust in the judiciary.²⁶ To examine the heterogeneous effects of the judicial decisions, all models include an interaction term between the treatment indicator and the government supporter variable. The columns in Table 2 show the effect of the lower court (models 1–3) and Supreme Court (models 4–6) rulings on respondents' trust in the judiciary. The table presents three main specifications: OLS (models 1 and 4), weighted least squares (WLS) with

²⁶See SI **C** for the full regression table of the results presented in Table 2. All models include controls and province fixed effects. I follow work using a similar identification strategy and employ robust standard errors clustered by city and date of interview (see Casas et al. 2024). Nevertheless, SI **F2** shows that the results are robust to clustering either by city or date of survey interview as well as using cluster bootstrap procedures (Cameron et al. 2008; Webb 2014). Results are also robust to fitting binary logit and ordered probit models as well as linear models using a continuous (scaled) version of the outcome (see SI **F1**). Moreover, results do not change when employing city, instead of province, fixed effects (SI **F3**) and when using an extended set of (potentially post-treatment) covariates (see SI **C2**).

Table 2. Main results

	Lower court			Supreme Court		
	OLS	EB+WLS	GM+WLS	OLS	EB+WLS	GM+WLS
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Court ruling	0.054 (0.126)	0.038 (0.082)	−0.033 (0.071)	0.245* (0.108)	0.265*** (0.073)	0.296*** (0.068)
Government supporter	0.463*** (0.076)	0.470*** (0.069)	0.405** (0.144)	0.464*** (0.045)	0.553*** (0.042)	0.507*** (0.086)
Court ruling × Government supporter	−0.325** (0.110)	−0.324*** (0.085)	−0.284* (0.125)	−0.526*** (0.128)	−0.632*** (0.107)	−0.534*** (0.079)
Constant	0.156 (0.208)	0.038 (0.283)	0.392 (0.351)	−0.373* (0.184)	−0.292 (0.284)	−0.647*** (0.172)
Mean(trust)	0.416	0.416	0.449	0.418	0.418	0.408
s.d.(trust)	0.494	0.494	0.498	0.494	0.494	0.492
Controls?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Province FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	286	286	372	275	275	348
Adjusted R ²	0.126	0.204	0.164	0.098	0.221	0.237

Note: Outcome: Trust in the Judiciary (0 = ‘A little’/‘None’; 1 = ‘A lot’/‘Some’). Robust standard errors clustered by city and date of survey interview. Controls: Age, Female, Education, SES, Subjective Income, Class, Religion. Models 2 and 4 employ entropy balance weights (Hainmueller 2012). Models 3 and 6 employ multivariate matching (Sekhon 2011) with optimal balance weights computed using the genetic matching algorithm (Diamond and Sekhon 2013) * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

entropy balance weights (models 2 and 5), and WLS using multivariate matching and weights computed by genetic optimization (models 3 and 6), as discussed in the previous section.²⁷

Table 2 shows that all the coefficients on the interaction terms between the court rulings and the co-partisanship indicator are negative and statistically significant at the 5 per cent level or less. This result indicates that the rulings had a significant negative effect among government supporters, as compared to opposition supporters. To better understand these heterogeneous effects, Figure 4 plots the expected average changes (first differences) in trust in the judiciary following the court decisions by respondents’ partisanship.

Substantively, the panels in Figure 4 show that both court rulings had significant, negative effects on government supporters’ trust in the judiciary. In particular, the lower court ruling (white circle) decreased the probability of trusting the judiciary by about 0.27–0.32 ($p < 0.01$), and the Supreme Court decision (black triangle) decreased the probability of trusting the judiciary by about 0.24–0.37 ($p < 0.01$). These effects are of considerable magnitude – they represent, on average, about 63 per cent (lower court) and 71 per cent (Supreme Court) of the outcome mean values and translate into average decreases of more than half of a standard deviation in respondents’ trust in the judiciary (lower court: 0.54; Supreme Court: 0.63). Together, these results provide strong support for **H1**, which predicted the judicial decisions to have a negative impact among those respondents who support the government.

Among respondents who identified as supporters of an opposition party, only the Supreme Court ruling had positive, statistically significant effects on public trust in the judiciary. As the table indicates, the judicial decision against the government increased the probability of trusting the judiciary by about 0.25 (OLS model, $p < 0.05$) and 0.27–0.30 (EB and GM models, $p < 0.001$). Again, these magnitudes are not trivial, as they denote more than half of the mean value of the outcome – a positive average change of more than 0.54 standard deviations in respondents’ trust in the judiciary. This finding indicates that opposition supporters were more trustful of the judicial institution after the Supreme Court invalidated the reform of the Judicial Council. This provides

²⁷See SI E for details about the entropy balancing and genetic matching specifications.

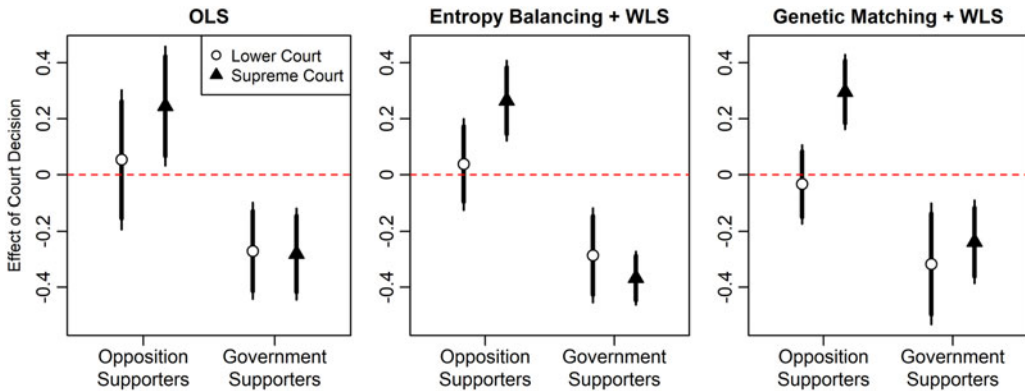


Figure 4. Heterogeneous effects of the court rulings.

Note: The panels show the expected effect (first difference) of the lower court (white circle) and Supreme Court (black triangle) rulings on trust in the judiciary among government supporters and opposition supporters. The vertical axis indicates the first difference in the outcome following each judicial ruling. The panels are based on the analyses presented in Table 2: models 1 and 3 (OLS, left), models 2 and 5 (EB+WLS, middle), and models 3 and 6 (GM+WLS, right). Thick and thin lines correspond to 90% and 95% confidence intervals, respectively.

support for **H2** with respect to the Supreme Court decision, but not regarding the lower court ruling.²⁸

It is worth discussing the null findings among opposition supporters in the wake of the lower court ruling. One possibility is that respondents were simply less aware of this decision. However, this explanation falls short, as government supporters did respond to the lower court ruling. This suggests the need to consider differences in the informational environment between opposition and government supporters. In particular, it is plausible that newspapers aligned with the government reported more extensively on the lower court ruling than outlets critical of the incumbent (see SI **B3.1**).²⁹

Another set of factors relates to opposition supporters' expectations following the lower court decision. Negativity bias offers one such explanation: individuals are more likely to *punish* political actors for failing to meet their expectations than to *reward* them for simply doing what is expected (Sheafer and Dvir-Gvirsman 2010; Soroka and McAdams 2015). In the context of judicial institutions, for instance, Christenson and Glick (2019) find that the negative effects of salient court decisions are stronger for individuals who are more ideologically distant from the court (see also Gibson and Nelson 2015; Mondak and Smithey 1997). Alternatively, the muted reaction among opposition supporters may reflect their expectation that the decision would be appealed. Yet this, too, does not fully account for the asymmetries between government and opposition supporters. Ultimately, the pattern is likely the result of a combination of these various factors, and future research investigating these partisan asymmetries would enrich the existing literature on public support for judicial institutions.

Unobserved Confounders

This article's design relies on the assumption that, other than the covariates I balance and match in the statistical models, there are no other omitted variables. However, I cannot reject the possibility

²⁸In SI **D**, I provide further suggestive evidence consistent with these heterogeneous partisan effects of the court rulings. In particular, SI **D1** shows that the supreme court ruling had a stronger effect among those opposition supporters who identified as strongly attached to their party, yet the ruling's effects among government supporters are similar regardless of their partisanship strength.

²⁹Later in the text, I consider the possibility of media effects, which is more thoroughly addressed in SI **I2**.

that *unobservables* are confounding the results. In particular, it is possible that the treatment groups are unbalanced on some unobserved factors. Even though this article's design does not allow me to rule out that possibility entirely, this section presents two sets of analyses that help me address this concern. First, I conduct placebo tests. The logic underlying this exercise is the following. If respondents in the control and treatment conditions are systematically different on some unobserved, relevant covariates, then such imbalances should show up as differences in respondents' beliefs and attitudes towards institutions and actors unrelated to the judiciary.

To examine this alternative, I run placebo regressions in which the outcome is trust in different groups and institutions (that is, the police, church, armed forces, television, neighbors, etc.) included in the 2013 Latinobarómetro poll (see SI [H1](#)). As with the main analyses, I fit linear models with entropy balance weights.³⁰ For each outcome, Figure 5 plots the coefficient on the *Court ruling* \times *Government supporter* interactions (upper panel) and first differences (lower panel) with respect to the lower court (gray lines) and Supreme Court (black lines) rulings across government and opposition supporters. Figure 5 shows that – except for a few cases – the court rulings are insignificant predictors of government and opposition supporters' attitudes about a wide array of institutions and groups unrelated to the judiciary.

Moreover, note that the magnitude of the few statistically significant coefficients and first differences displayed in Figure 5 is considerably smaller than the effects on public trust in the judiciary shown in Table 2 and Figure 4. Most importantly, the panels do not display clear partisan trends, which suggests that any differences in the figure do not explain the main findings. Overall, these results indicate that, after accounting for imbalance on the covariates included in the main models, the treatment and control groups do not seem to be substantially different from each other. In other words, if respondents interviewed before and after the Rizzo decisions vary systematically in some (unobserved) characteristics, such dissimilarities are not associated with the extensive set of attitudes shown in the panels.

In addition to these placebo tests, SI [G3](#) presents the results of sensitivity analyses (see Cinelli and Hazlett 2020; Frank et al. 2023). These exercises also support the credibility of the main results. For example, with respect to the Supreme Court decision, sensitivity analyses based on R^2 parameterization (SI [G3.1](#)) indicate that any unobserved confounders must explain at least about 23–32cent of the residual variance both of the treatment and of the outcome to reduce to zero the interaction coefficients reported in Table 2.³¹

More importantly, the analyses also suggest that, in most of the models, any hypothetical confounders as strong as *Government supporter* are not sufficient to explain away the observed interaction estimates. In other models, such a hypothetical confounder would need to explain about 45 per cent or 70 per cent of the variation in the outcome. Given the extensively documented strong association between government co-partisanship and support for judicial institutions (Armaly 2018; Bartels and Kramon 2020, 2022; Driscoll et al. 2024; Nicholson and Hansford 2014; Sen 2017), these sensitivity analysis results lend greater confidence in the main findings.³² Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine an unobserved confounder stronger than the *Government supporter* indicator.

In sum, although the placebo tests and sensitivity analyses reported in this section do not conclusively rule out unobserved confounding, these exercises do provide empirical evidence

³⁰I employ a binary measure of these outcomes. These models employ controls, province fixed effects, and robust standard errors clustered by city and date of interview.

³¹The quantities must be about 20–29 percent to make the observed interaction coefficients statistically insignificant at the 5 per cent level.

³²Employing the approach proposed recently by Frank et al. (2023) leads to similar conclusions (see SI [G3.2](#)). For instance, to make the interaction coefficient statistically insignificant at the 5 per cent level, an omitted variable would need to be correlated with the outcome at about 0.13–0.35 (lower court) or 0.38–0.52 (Supreme Court). For comparison, consider data from the Latinobarómetro surveys (2008–2013), which indicate that the correlation between being a supporter of the government and trust in the judiciary is $r \approx 0.13$.

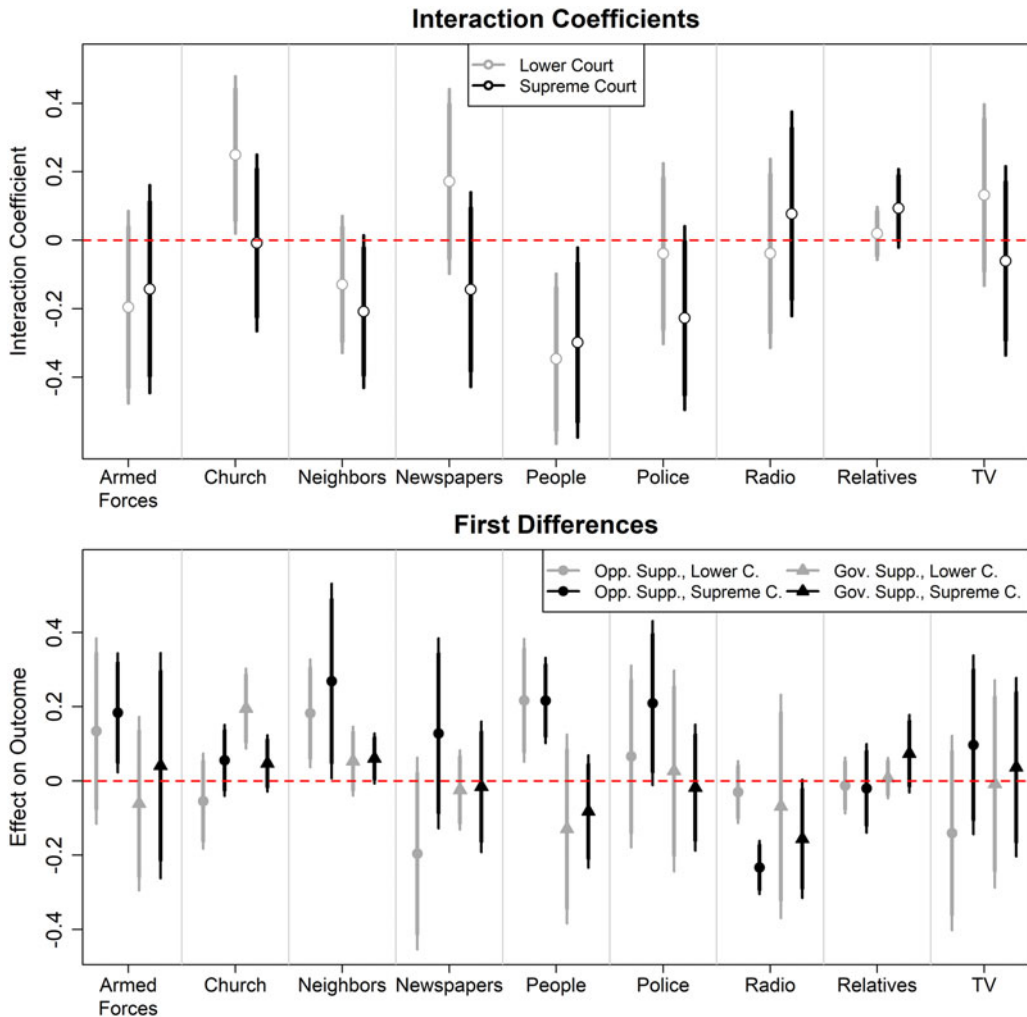


Figure 5. Placebo tests.

Note: The panels show the effect of the lower court and Supreme Court rulings on different outcomes across government and opposition supporters. See SI [B2](#) for information about these outcome items. The top panel plots the coefficient on the *Court ruling x Government supporter* interaction (lower court, gray; Supreme Court, black) with respect to each outcome. The bottom panel plots the first differences in each outcome (lower court, gray; Supreme Court, black) among government supporters (triangles) and opposition supporters (circles). The panels are based on linear models using entropy balance weights. Thick and thin lines correspond to 90 per cent and 95 per cent confidence intervals, respectively.

against the possibility that partisan reactions to the rulings are driven by unobserved differences across treatment groups.

Exploring the Mechanism

My theory suggests that judicial checks provide citizens with information that is primarily instrumental in nature (H3). If such information is driving the partisan reactions to the Rizzo rulings, then we should expect to see stronger effects among better informed respondents and those who are more politically aware. To preliminarily test this hypothesis, I employ two Latinobarómetro items that may proxy for how well informed and politically aware respondents are: *newspaper frequency* (measured by the question ‘How many days in the past week did you

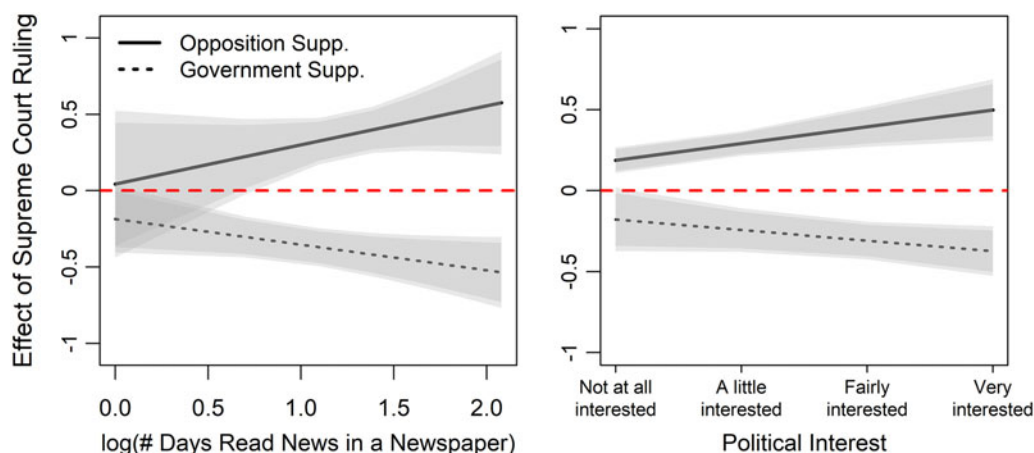


Figure 6. Supreme Court ruling effect by newspaper frequency and political interest.

Note: The panels show the expected effect (first difference) of the Supreme Court ruling on trust in the judiciary across values of log (newspaper frequency + 1) (left panel) and *political interest* (right panel) among opposition supporters (solid line) and government supporters (dotted line). The panels are based on analyses employing genetic matching weights and the extensive set of covariates. Lighter and darker shaded areas indicate 95 per cent and 90 per cent confidence intervals, respectively.

read news in a newspaper?’) and *political interest* (from ‘not at all’ to ‘very’ interested). Figure 6 plots the impact of the Supreme Court decision across respondents’ levels of newspaper frequency and political interest.

Although I do not draw strong causal conclusions from the patterns shown in Figure 6, there are important concerns about the validity of the *newspaper frequency* measure, which may obscure the interpretation of these results. For example, frequent newspaper readers may focus more on non-political news, and newspapers in Argentina may not be entirely objective sources of information. This makes it challenging to disentangle the ruling’s impact from media coverage.³³ I explore these issues in detail in SI I. While I am ultimately unable to fully isolate the effect of the ruling from media influence, additional analyses suggest that the *newspaper frequency* item likely measures respondents’ exposure to *political* news (rather than non-political news) (SI II), and media freedom in Argentina is fairly high, indicating that newspapers’ coverage is largely independent from the government (SI I2.1). Yet, potential media effects do limit the generalizability of the results and could suggest an imprecise treatment (SI I2.2). Therefore, the effects shown in the left panel of Figure 6 should be interpreted conservatively as the *joint* effect of the Rizzo ruling and any influence from media coverage (cf. Muñoz et al. 2020).

Figure 6 reveals that, as respondents become better informed and more politically interested, the effect of the Supreme Court decision on public trust in the judiciary increases in magnitude.³⁴ Yet, notably, these effects move in opposite directions depending on whether respondents support the government or the opposition. Although these estimates are substantively similar across government and opposition supporters, they are imprecise among the former group. While Figure 6 is consistent with the mechanism suggested by H3, the imprecise estimates, along with concerns about post-treatment bias and statistical power, demand caution in interpreting these findings.

Despite their limitations, the suggestive patterns shown in the figure nicely complement existing comparative work on judicial institutions and public opinion. Extant research shows that

³³I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this issue to my attention.

³⁴The figure is based on models employing genetic matching weights and the extensive set of covariates with province fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered by city and date of interview. SI D2 shows that the patterns hold when employing a binary version of these moderators.

the relationship between courts' performance and public evaluations of the judicial institution is stronger among more aware, informed, or knowledgeable individuals (Aydın-Çakır and Şekercioğlu 2016; Garoupa and Magalhães 2021; Salzman and Ramsey 2013). The reason is that these subgroups hold more accurate beliefs about the actual functioning of courts in a given political context. Figure 6 adds another layer to this story. If the judicial behavior that citizens observe provides instrumental information, better informed and more aware publics will exhibit partisan heterogeneity, regardless of whether the courts function well or poorly.³⁵

Conclusion

This article contributes to our understanding of citizens' support for judicial institutions writ large. In line with the theoretical expectations, the results demonstrate that partisanship drives citizens' reactions to judicial checks on the incumbent. Suggestive evidence indicates that these partisan effects intensify among better informed and politically aware citizens, indicating that judicial checks provide information about the alignment of courts relative to the government.

While the theory is generally applicable, there may be certain scope conditions that warrant discussion. In principle, the theory is better suited to explain the relationship between court rulings and support for judicial institutions in contexts with stable partisan attachments.³⁶ If citizens want judicial institutions to advance their partisan interests, and judicial checks help them better understand the judiciary's alignment relative to the government, then party stability becomes an important condition. In the context of this study, president Fernández's Peronist (Justicialist) party has historically represented a stable partisan cleavage (Calvo and Murillo 2004; Levitsky 1998). This stability may have facilitated partisan evaluations of the judiciary among both government and opposition supporters. Moreover, strong attachment to the Peronist Party might help explain the asymmetric partisan reactions to the lower court ruling shown in Figure 4. While similar stable partisan cleavages suggest that the theory applies well to the United States, its expectations are less clear in contexts where such a condition is absent. One might expect judicial checks to elicit weaker partisan reactions in places where citizens have weak partisan attachments. However, increased polarization may enable partisan evaluations of the judiciary even in contexts of unstable party systems or where citizens lack strong attachment to their parties. Research exploring the impact of these institutional factors would be a valuable contribution.

Alongside its contributions, this study faces limitations that point to new opportunities for future research on law and courts, especially from a comparative perspective. For one thing, the political context studied in this article may limit the generalizability of the results. Because the reform involved changes to the judicial institution itself and was highly salient, the effects described here may not extend to other policy areas. Relatedly, given that the reform to the judicial council would have theoretically increased democratic participation in the judiciary, it remains unclear to what extent partisan reactions to the Rizzo decisions reflect citizens' political attitudes distinct from partisanship – namely, beliefs about judicial accountability and democratic responsiveness. While data availability precludes me from addressing this possibility, the 2013 judicial reform presents a promising opportunity for scholars interested in these questions.

Moreover, the outcome I examined – trust in the judiciary – is conventionally understood to be a measure of *specific* (in contrast to *diffuse*) public support for courts (cf. Driscoll and Nelson 2018). To the extent that new conceptual and empirical work develops more enduring measures of citizens' attitudes about judicial institutions writ large, future research should inquire whether and how judicial checks can affect public legitimacy of the judiciary. In addition, the data and design of this article do not allow me to assess how long-lasting the (partisan) effects of the Rizzo rulings

³⁵Yet, as noted above, the effects shown in Figure 6 can also be a function of polarized or partisan media.

³⁶I thank an anonymous reviewer for stressing this point.

may be. Finally, we know little about how media influence shapes partisan reactions to salient court rulings, a fruitful avenue for theoretical and empirical inquiry.

Ultimately, the findings discussed in this article raise new questions that are relevant for two sets of literatures. On one hand, a prominent body of work has argued that public support serves as a protective mechanism for judicial institutions facing attacks from the other branches (Helmke 2010a; Krehbiel 2016; Staton 2006; Vanberg 2001). If judicial actors care about the citizenry, my results – showing that judicial checks bring about public opinion costs and rewards – suggest that courts must factor in the partisan nature of citizens' attitudes toward judicial institutions in their strategic calculations. While a great deal of recent work has been devoted to showing that citizens evaluate courts through partisan lenses both in the United States and beyond (Bartels and Kramon 2020; Nicholson and Hansford 2014), the judicial politics literature has yet to incorporate this instrumental dynamic of public support into models of the separation of powers, constitutional review, and judicial behavior.³⁷

On the other hand, my results indicating that government supporters react negatively to judicial checks on incumbents, combined with the possibility that political leaders can shape such attitudes (Sen 2017), raise new questions about elite behavior in response to politically salient court challenges, including incumbents' compliance with judicial orders and advancement of court-curbing proposals. Future research in these areas will undoubtedly deepen our understanding of the role of public support for judicial institutions in interbranch politics.

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³⁷Alternatively, judicial actors may not primarily be concerned with mass publics but instead engage with other audiences (see Baum 2006; Black et al. 2016). This could explain courts' willingness to engage in potentially costly institutional conflicts.

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