A Faustian Bargain? Evidence from a Conjoint Experiment on Democracy and Security in Mexico*

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Abstract

Criminal violence challenges democratic governance in numerous countries, sparking debates about the potential tradeoffs between democracy and security. To what extent are citizens in such contexts willing to sacrifice democracy in exchange for security? We investigate this question using a conjoint experiment embedded within a nationally representative in-person survey of 2,700 Mexican voters. Participants evaluated pairs of hypothetical societies varying across five dimensions: household income, free elections, local violence, national violence, and due process protections. We find that—on average—Mexican citizens overwhelmingly prioritize free elections and due process, even amid acute insecurity. However, this commitment is not uniform. Respondents directly affected by violence are less supportive of due process protections—particularly under scenarios of increased local violence—and those living in municipalities where security conditions have improved are more supportive of free elections. Furthermore, we consistently find that hypothetical increases in violence have stronger effects on preferences than potential reductions, and local security concerns outweigh national security considerations. Our findings suggest that while most citizens in violent democracies resist trading rights for safety, insecurity can selectively erode support for how—rather than whether—security is enforced.

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1 Introduction

Democracies often face tensions in seeking to safeguard public security without compromising democratic principles and freedoms. In recent decades, these challenges have been especially acute for young democracies, many of which—particularly in Latin America and Africa—have struggled to contain persistently high levels of crime and violence (Davies et al., 2024; Fernandez and Kuenzi, 2010; García-Ponce, 2025). A central debate among scholars and practitioners is whether enhancing security through tougher law enforcement or militarization inevitably undermines democracy, or whether the two can be reconciled. This debate is particularly relevant in highly polarized democracies with weak rule of law, as these countries often find themselves on a "slippery slope" towards democratic erosion (Bermeo, 2016; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). In such contexts, demands for order and security may empower authorities to undermine civil liberties (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024; Visconti, 2020) or incentivize civilians to take the law in their own hands (Bateson, 2021; García-Ponce, Young and Zeitzoff, 2023; Moncada, 2022).

The tension between security and democracy raises a fundamental question: How much do citizens value democracy, and to what extent are they willing to sacrifice democratic institutions and rights in exchange for the promise of safety? While extensive research has examined how crime affects trust in institutions and satisfaction with democracy in Latin America (Blanco, 2013; Carreras, 2016; García-Ponce and Laterzo, 2023), few studies have directly tested citizens' willingness to trade specific democratic features for concrete security improvements. This gap is particularly problematic given the policy implications: if citizens truly prefer security over democracy, leaders may face electoral incentives to adopt authoritarian measures, whereas if preferences favor democracy even amid insecurity, authoritarian appeals may be less politically viable.

Mexico provides an ideal case for examining this apparent security–democracy tradeoff. During the past two decades, Mexico has experienced a surge in criminal violence amid a long-running war against drug cartels. Since the government's 2006 crackdown on organized crime,

more than 460,000 people have been killed and approximately 120,000 disappearances have been reported, based on official data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) and the National Registry of Missing or Disappeared Persons (RNPDNO). The severity of the security crisis has disrupted daily life and tested the faith of Mexicans in democratic governance. Public pressure to restore safety has fueled policies such as the militarization of public security, including deploying the army to patrol and creating a new national guard under military control. Critics argue that these measures weaken civilian control of security forces, respect for due process, or even elections free from undue pressures, potentially jeopardizing Mexico's democratic consolidation.

Our study examines whether voters perceive a trade-off between security and democracy by exploring the conditions under which Mexican citizens are willing to forgo core features of democratic governance in exchange for greater security. Drawing on a nationally representative conjoint experiment conducted in 2024, we assess how individuals weigh democratic institutions against security outcomes and economic well-being. Our experimental design builds on Adserà, Arenas and Boix (2023), who conducted similar research in Brazil, France, and the United States, to estimate the willingness of the respondents to trade democracy for individual income (as well as other societal attributes). We present respondents with pairs of hypothetical societies that randomly vary across five key dimensions: household income, democratic elections, local violence, national security, and due process protections. This approach allows us to estimate the relative importance citizens place on each attribute and to identify the conditions under which security concerns might outweigh democratic commitments.

Our findings challenge the Faustian bargain hypothesis while revealing important nuances in citizen preferences. We provide evidence that, despite Mexico's acute security challenges, citizens on average exhibit a strong commitment to two pillars of democratic rule: free and fair elections and protection of basic due process rights. Even when confronted with scenarios of improved security or economic gains, most respondents prioritize democratic governance over

authoritarian shortcuts. Democratic attributes account for approximately 51% of the variation in choices, with free elections being the single most important factor (34% relative importance). This suggests remarkable resilience in democratic preferences even under conditions of severe insecurity.

At the same time, we find meaningful heterogeneity in preferences. In particular, those exposed to high levels of violence or direct victimization show a somewhat greater willingness to trade off democracy for security, notably due process more than free elections, highlighting that a pro-democracy consensus cannot be taken for granted if insecurity continues to worsen. Additionally, we identify an important asymmetry in security preferences: hypothetical increases in violence have much stronger negative effects on society evaluations than equivalent decreases have positive effects, consistent with loss aversion in the security domain. This asymmetry suggests that while current violence levels have not pushed most Mexicans to abandon democracy, further deterioration could prove more politically consequential than equivalent improvements.

Our findings make several important contributions to scholarship on democracy, security, and public opinion. The Mexican case, we argue, illustrates both the resilience of democracy and the pressures that prolonged violence can exert on them. By framing and testing this tradeoff empirically, our study speaks to current debates on the compatibility of democracy and security in Latin America and beyond. We provide evidence against strong versions of the security-democracy tradeoff, showing that citizens can simultaneously prioritize both security and democratic governance. This supports theories emphasizing the complementarity rather than competition between these values. Moreover, our study sheds light on the conditions that sustain the paradoxical co-existance of the erosion of institutional pillars of democratic governance with high popular support for executives who are responsive to urgent citizen's demands.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops our theoretical framework by reviewing competing perspectives on the security-democracy relationship and deriving testable hypotheses. Section 3 provides background on Mexico's security crisis and democratic trajectory. Section 4

presents our experimental design and sampling strategy. Section 5 reports results from our main analysis and heterogeneity tests. Section 6 discusses implications for theory and policy, while Section 7 concludes with directions for future research.

2 Theoretical Framework

Liberal democracies are founded on principles of individual rights, legal constraints on state power, and government by consent. However, rising threats—whether crime, terrorism, or civil unrest—often spur calls for more aggressive state action that can conflict with those democratic principles. Following Przeworski's (2010) notion that democratic institutions must balance effectiveness with accountability, a key dilemma arises over whether democracies can provide security without undermining the procedural constraints that define them. Scholars have long debated whether the provision of public goods such as peace and security necessarily conflicts with the constraints of limited government, and whether either government officials or citizens perceive a tradeoff between democracy and security (Lipset, 1959; Nathan, 2020).

On the one hand, some scholarship emphasizes security as a public good that need not contradict democracy. Proponents of this view argue that effective rule of law and citizen security are actually foundations of a healthy democracy, not alternatives to it. Without resorting to authoritarian tactics, the argument goes, democracies can combat crime and violence through accountable institutions—professional police, independent judiciaries, community engagement, or even democratically sanctioned and temporary suspension of certain rights to address security emergencies (Ramraj and Thiruvengadam, 2009; Ungar, 2011).

Indeed, weakening democratic checks (for instance, by militarizing security forces or tolerating human rights abuses) may yield only short-term gains while corroding institutional trust and legitimacy in the long run. Empirical studies have shown that when crime and insecurity persist, trust in institutions and democracy decline (Blanco and Ruiz, 2013; García-Ponce and Laterzo, 2023; Carreras, 2013; Fernandez and Kuenzi, 2010), but this does not automatically translate into

majority support for authoritarianism. Actually, crime victimization may produce dissatisfaction with democracy but simultaneously incentivize citizen's political participation (Bateson, 2012; Ley, 2018). Many citizens continue to demand both security and adherence to democratic processes, pressuring governments to deliver better policing and justice within a democratic framework.

On the other hand, particularly in contexts beyond a threshold of high crime and violence, some research suggests that citizens may be willing to sacrifice certain democratic freedoms to achieve security or economic prosperity. From this perspective, governments and/or voters perceive a trade-off in which a greater security provision necessitates some infringement of democratic norms (a "Faustian bargain"[1]). Citizens may endorse punitive approaches or authoritarian measures if they believe such measures will protect them from violence (Arias and Goldstein, 2010; Chevigny, 2003; Cruz, 2011; Holland, 2013). High crime rates can also drive citizens to tolerate or even endorse extra-constitutional actions in extreme cases. Survey data from across Latin America indicate that in countries plagued by violence, a majority can be open to a military coup "under conditions of high crime," reflecting how insecurity undermines democratic values (Pérez, 2011).

Incremental erosions of democratic norms and institutions can lead to more serious deterioration of democratic institutions. This process may involve a self-reinforcing cycle of democratic backsliding: for example, security demands can lead to increased militarization of public security, greater opacity and impunity, suspension of civil liberties under states of emergency, and further democratic erosion. As *mano dura* policies reduce violence, increased popular support might embolden the executive to concentrate more power and to tilt the electoral playing field in his favor, posing serious concerns for democratic government and the rule of law. Perhaps the clearest contemporary example is El Salvador, where Bukele's government drastically reduced violent crime through repressive measures, including mass arrests and the suspension of con-

[1]In Goethe's drama *Faust*, the protagonist strikes a deal sacrificing his soul in exchange for material benefits.

stitutional rights. While domestically popular, Bukele has effectively eliminated constitutional checks, electoral accountability, and the possibility of alternation in government (Flores-Macías, 2024; Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024).

We evaluate whether a security vs democracy dilemma exists in the perceptions of citizens living in "violent democracies" (Arias and Goldstein, 2010), where democratic institutions co-exist with high levels of violence and insecurity. Mexico is a fertile ground for exploring this phenomenon, specifically due to the escalation of drug-related violence and organized crime that has put significant pressure on democratic governance (Aguilar, Cornejo and Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2025; Ríos, 2024; Schedler, 2014). Nonetheless, in Mexico, as in other Latin American countries, there remains widespread normative support for democracy as the best form of government, even amid frustration with insecurity. Cross-national opinion surveys like the *Latinobarómetro* consistently find that most respondents prefer democracy over any non-democratic alternative, although the depth of this commitment is debated.

However, other studies highlight that certain contexts or subgroups do exhibit weaker attachment to democratic norms. For example, Graham and Svolik (2020) show that when voters are deeply polarized or face partisan tradeoffs, some become willing to tolerate undemocratic behavior by their preferred candidates. In Latin America, LAPOP surveys and analyses find that those most affected by crime, or those who have lower interpersonal trust, are more inclined to accept authoritarian solutions (Carreras, 2013; Merolla, Mezini and Zechmeister, 2013; Visconti, 2020). These mixed insights underscore why the question remains open and context-dependent: Does intensifying insecurity lead to a breakdown of democratic commitment ("security trumps democracy"), or do democratic values endure even when security is precarious? Do citizens in violent democracies perceive a trade-off between security and democracy?

Some scholars argue that expressed support for democracy, or for authoritarian alternatives, in surveys can be superficial or susceptible to erosion when confronted with acute threats. This has led to experimental approaches to test how genuine these commitments are. Specifically,

recent empirical research using conjoint experiments and other designs has started to probe whether citizens will trade off democratic principles when facing tough choices. For instance, Adserà, Arenas and Boix (2023) implemented a survey conjoint in multiple countries to gauge how much people value democracy relative to economic benefits. They found that, on average, individuals were strongly attached to democratic governance—respondents would only agree to live without free elections if it came with extraordinarily large gains in personal income (e.g., income multiples of three or more). Even then, an "authoritarian bargain" attracted only a minority; forming a majority coalition to abandon free elections proved highly unlikely under most conditions. Such findings suggest that democracy can be remarkably robust: despite concerns about democratic backsliding globally, there appears to be a substantial reservoir of pro-democratic sentiment in many societies.

A similar conjoint experiment on seven countries (Ferrer et al., 2025) tested for trade-offs of distinct features of democracy beyond free and fair elections (such as an independent judiciary, freedom of speech, freedom of association) founding that people value more elections than some of the features (like freedom of association). A study based on a series of experiments with over 35,000 respondents across 32 democratic and autocratic countries, Neundorf et al. (2024) find that citizens strongly value free and fair elections but many are willing to sacrifice constraints on executive power in exchange for economic prosperity. In Brazil, respondents of a thorough online survey, show an increase in support for unlawful enforcement practices but without compromising their attitudes towards democracy as a form of government or increasing support for military coups and executive aggrandizement (Masullo, Krakowski and Morisi, 2025).

Our study positions itself at the nexus of these debates by providing focused evidence from Mexico's high-violence democracy. We draw on the above literature to formulate our expectations. We consider arguments that punitive "mano dura" policies (iron-fist policies) can ultimately undermine democracy eroding human rights, as well as counter-arguments that strengthening rule of law is the sustainable path to security in democracies. Specifically, we conduct a conjoint

experiment to evaluate the preferences of Mexican citizens on the democracy vs security trade-off. Regarding democracy our experiment asks respondents to value not only the quintessential democratic institution -free and fair elections- but also perhaps the main due process protection -the right to personal physical integrity when detained by state forces. Regarding security, we ask people to consider different levels of violence both in their community and at the national level. Making use of official crime and victimization data, we also explore the dilemma under contexts with different types and levels of actual violence (such as extortion, homicide, or cartel-related violence).

3 The Mexican Context

In December 2006, former Mexican president Felipe Calderón initiated a war against organized crime by deploying military forces throughout Northern and Western Mexico. Drug cartels had already flourished significantly during previous decades, particularly under the era of one-party rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). For instance, Trejo and Ley (2020) show that in the 1990s, cartels perpetrated considerable violence, especially during gubernatorial power shifts. Once the PRI's one-party dominance ended in 2000, cartels continued employing violence strategically to retain or re-establish their power.

Calderón's presidency marked a critical shift in public security policies, placing the drug war at the center of his administration. The Mexican army, directed by the Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA) became the primary force executing these operations. Federal police forces and the recently created National Guard often supported military efforts. Concurrently, militarized policing emerged, with civilian-led police units increasingly employing military-grade weapons and tactics in collaboration with military forces (Flores-Macías and Zarkin, 2021). Such militarization adopted warfare-derived security strategies, leading to widespread human rights abuses and eroding democratic accountability (Brewer and Verduzco, 2022; Magaloni and Rodriguez, 2020; Romero and Farfán, 2024; Córdova and Tiscornia, 2025).

President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018) continued a similar approach to organized crime, complementing domestic military deployment with the establishment of a new national police force, the national gendarmerie (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). Although military operations somewhat decreased, Peña Nieto's public security strategy remained centered on targeting criminal leaders, drug seizures, and crop eradication. This policy persisted and intensified under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–2024), despite his campaign promise of addressing crime through a softer rhetoric of "hugs, not bullets" (Deare, 2021), and has continued under President Sheinbaum's administration.

Mexico's drug war has resulted in nearly half a million homicides. As shown in Figure 1, the country was experiencing its lowest homicide rate in modern history when the drug war started and violence levels peaked in 2018. While there has been a decline in homicide rates in recent years, homicidal violence remains high and dissapearances have been increasing, reaching over 120,000 people reported missing since the start of the drug war, based on the most recent data from the National Search Commission.

Thus, the Mexican case encapsulates a critical example of the broader democracy-security paradox. Mexico's democratic transition coincided paradoxically with a sharp escalation in criminal violence, particularly after Calderón's militarized crackdown. Extreme insecurity might logically prompt citizens to endorse authoritarian security measures; yet, simultaneously, Mexico exhibits resilient democratic features, such as sustained public mobilizations advocating democratic reform and competitive elections following the end of one-party rule. Such conditions create a profound "security/democracy dilemma," wherein rising demands for security and *mano dura* approaches clash with democratic principles and human rights safeguards. This dilemma is widely evident in political discourses across Latin America, where politicians advocating hardline security policies frequently gain popular support.

Figure 1: Homicide rate in Mexico, 1990–2024

4 Research Design

To investigate Mexican citizens' preferences regarding the trade-off between security and democracy, we conducted a conjoint experiment embedded within a nationally representative, face-to-face survey of 2,700 respondents across Mexico in July 2024. We preregistered our study design, hypotheses, and analysis plan prior to data collection. The survey and conjoint protocol were approved by an institutional review board, and respondents gave informed consent, with the option to skip any question, ensuring adherence to ethical standards. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the challenging security context in Mexico, we took additional precautions to guarantee the safety, privacy, and anonymity of all participants throughout the research process.

4.1 Sampling Design and Implementation

We implemented a multi-stage probability sampling approach to ensure our survey was representative at the national level and reflected the diverse contexts within Mexico. The sampling frame was based on the most up-to-date national electoral registry (Lista Nominal) provided by

Mexico's National Electoral Institute (INE), covering approximately 98.2% of adult citizens aged 18 or older as of March 2024. Our sampling involved four stages: first, we selected primary sampling units (PSUs)—electoral sections—using stratified systematic sampling with probability proportional to size (PPS). The sample was stratified geographically across five regions (Centro, Noreste, Noroeste, Occidente, Sureste) and further categorized by proximity to the northern and southern borders. The final allocation resulted in 270 PSUs nationwide, totaling 2,700 respondents. Stratification ensured accurate regional representation and enhanced the precision of our estimates, particularly for border municipalities, where we applied oversampling to better capture these specific dynamics.

Within each selected PSU, the subsequent stages further refined respondent selection. In urban areas, we randomly selected blocks (manzanas), whereas rural areas involved clusters of dwellings. Within each secondary sampling unit, households were systematically selected using random starting points and intervals. In the final stage, individuals within selected households were chosen using a random method facilitated by electronic tablets during fieldwork. Our sampling design explicitly accounted for potential security-related access issues by incorporating replacement PSUs selected from independent samples with matched stratification characteristics. This sampling process ensured a robust representation of the Mexican population.

4.2 Experimental Design

The conjoint experiment presented participants with a series of five pairs of hypothetical societies that varied randomly along five key dimensions, which were selected to capture the core elements of the democracy-security tradeoff as well as economic conditions. The attributes and their possible levels were as follows:

1. **Household income**: Five levels of monthly household income—5,000, 10,000, 15,000, 21,000, and 34,000 pesos—corresponding to the first, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth deciles of the income distribution according to the most recent INEGI data.

2. **Democratic elections**: Whether there are or are not free elections to choose the President of Mexico

3. **Local security conditions**: Whether the level of violence in the respondent's municipality is equal to, half of, or double the current level

4. **National security conditions**: Whether the level of violence in the country as a whole is equal to, half of, or double the current level

5. **Due process in security operations**: Whether in security operations, most detainees are tortured or their human rights are protected.

Each hypothetical society was thus defined by a combination of one level from each of these five attributes (e.g., a society with household income of 15,000 pesos, with free elections, local violence half current levels, national violence same as current, and human rights respected in security operations). By randomly varying these attributes across profiles, we effectively create numerous scenarios that resemble potential real-world tradeoffs. The violence levels (half or double current) were chosen to reflect significant changes that are still within realistic bounds of Mexico's recent experience. The "no elections" condition represents a clearly non-democratic scenario (akin to authoritarian rule) which, while hypothetical for present-day Mexico, provides a stark test of democratic commitment.[2] We acknowledge that this setup simplifies complex issues—democracy is reduced to only two but key pillars -elections and due process rights-, and security to crime rates and tactics. However, this simple setup is very clear and it allows us to isolate the core elements of the debate.

For each pair of societies, respondents were asked to choose which society they considered better for themselves and to rate each society on a scale from zero (very bad) to ten (very good). This design generated multiple observations per respondent, allowing for robust estimation of

[2]Though not free and fair, elections have taken place in Mexico for decades including during the long period of the non-democratic hegemonic-party regime. To clarify the choice, we thus present respondents with two starkly contrasting options: "free elections" or "no elections".

preferences. Our methodology closely follows the approach used by Adserà, Arenas and Boix (2023), who employed a similar conjoint design with six attributes: individual monthly income, average country income, democratic elections, public health insurance, meritocratic advancement, and income inequality. The key adaptation in our study is the focus on security-related attributes (local violence, national security, and due process) instead of welfare state and mobility attributes, reflecting the particular salience of security concerns in the Mexican context.

By experimentally presenting Mexicans with scenarios that force a choice between more security and less democracy (and vice versa), we aim to test whether a tradeoff manifests in public preferences, or whether, any, none, or both pillars of democracy that we capture (free elections and basic protections of due process rights) remains non-negotiable for most. We measure the impact of each attribute on respondent preferences by estimating Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs), as is standard for conjoint experiments. In essence, we estimate how much the probability of a society being chosen changes when, say, "free elections" are present versus absent, holding other attributes random. We do this for both the choice outcome and the 0–10 rating outcome to check consistency. From these estimates, we also compute the relative importance of each attribute—that is, the share of the total variation in choices explained by that attribute. This provides an intuitive way to compare which factors loom largest in citizens' decision criteria. All analysis incorporates fixed effects for each choice task to account for any baseline differences across respondents and pairs, and standard errors are clustered by respondent.

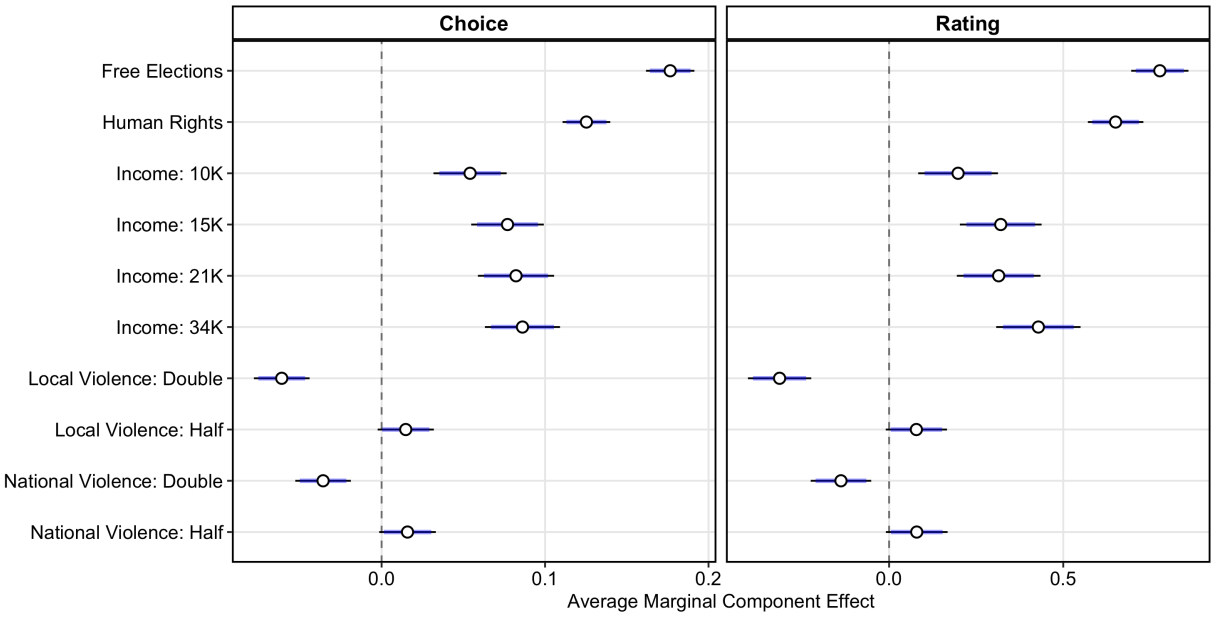
5 Findings

5.1 Main Findings

Our findings reveal that, on average, Mexican citizens prioritize democratic governance and the rule of law over improvements in security or income. As shown in Figure 2, the results are consistent using either the forced-choice or rating outcomes. In short, most Mexicans in our sample

were not willing to forfeit core democratic institutions for the sake of hypothetical improvements in security or household income. Instead, they revealed a clear preference for democracy and legality, even in the face of dire security scenarios.

Figure 2: Main Results



According to the attribute weights, the presence of free and fair elections is the most important factor shaping respondents' choices, accounting for approximately 34% of the weight in their decisions. All else equal, respondents overwhelmingly rejected a hypothetical society without democratic presidential elections in favor of one with free elections, indicating that Mexicans place very high intrinsic value on living in a democracy. Notably, democracy's importance exceeded that of material and security factors.

The next most important attribute was basic due process rights (freedom from torture when detained by state forces), with about 24% relative importance. Societies where detainees are tortured—where security forces violate due process—were significantly less preferred than otherwise identical societies where detainees' rights are respected. This is a remarkable finding: even amidst a security crisis, respondents are not simply demanding a crackdown at any cost. They

care about the means and favor a rule-of-law approach to security. Together, the two explicitly democratic attributes (free elections and due process) accounted for roughly 58% of the decision weight, underscoring a strong public commitment to democratic values.

By comparison, income and violence levels had more modest effects. Household income contributed about 17% to choice decisions. Respondents preferred higher-income societies, as expected, but many were unwilling to choose a wealthier society if it lacked democracy or violated rights. Local violence accounted for roughly 15% of decision weight. Doubling local violence relative to current levels made a society significantly less attractive, while halving it made a society more appealing—but even this dramatic improvement in security carried less weight than the presence of democratic elections or due process. National violence was the least influential attribute, at approximately 10%, suggesting that respondents were less concerned with the broader national security situation than with local conditions and institutional attributes. The lower salience of national-level violence may reflect that distant or aggregate security metrics feel less tangible than what individuals experience in their immediate vicinity. In total, both violence attributes accounted for about a quarter of the decision weight—significant, but clearly secondary to democracy.

One noteworthy pattern is an asymmetry in how respondents react to changes in violence. Hypothetical increases in violence had a larger effect on preferences than equivalent decreases. Doubling local violence had a stronger negative impact on a society's desirability than the positive impact of halving it (and likewise for national violence). This is consistent with loss aversion: the pain of worsening security outweighs the satisfaction of improving it. Modest reductions in violence, while appreciated, did not upend the ranking of attributes—respondents already valued democracy highly at present violence levels, and even halving violence did not alter that hierarchy. This finding carries a policy implication: preventing further security deterioration is crucial, as sharp downturns can have outsized effects on public sentiment, even if equivalent improvements yield relatively muted gains.

A second notable pattern is the gap between local and national security. The fact that local violence had a higher impact on choices than national violence (15% vs 10% importance) indicates that people prioritize the security of their immediate environment over broader national conditions. A plausible interpretation is that personal safety and community well-being are what citizens directly experience, so those factors dominate their perceptions of a society's desirability. National-level violence may be perceived as background noise or something that varies by region, whereas local violence directly shapes daily life. This resonates with the notion that "all security is local" and suggests that community-level security improvements may yield more public satisfaction than abstract national strategies. It also might explain why, despite Mexico's very high national homicide rates, many citizens still hold out hope for democracy—the violence's impact on attitudes is mediated by how close to home it hits. In areas where national violence is high but one's local community is relatively safe, people may still strongly support democratic norms.

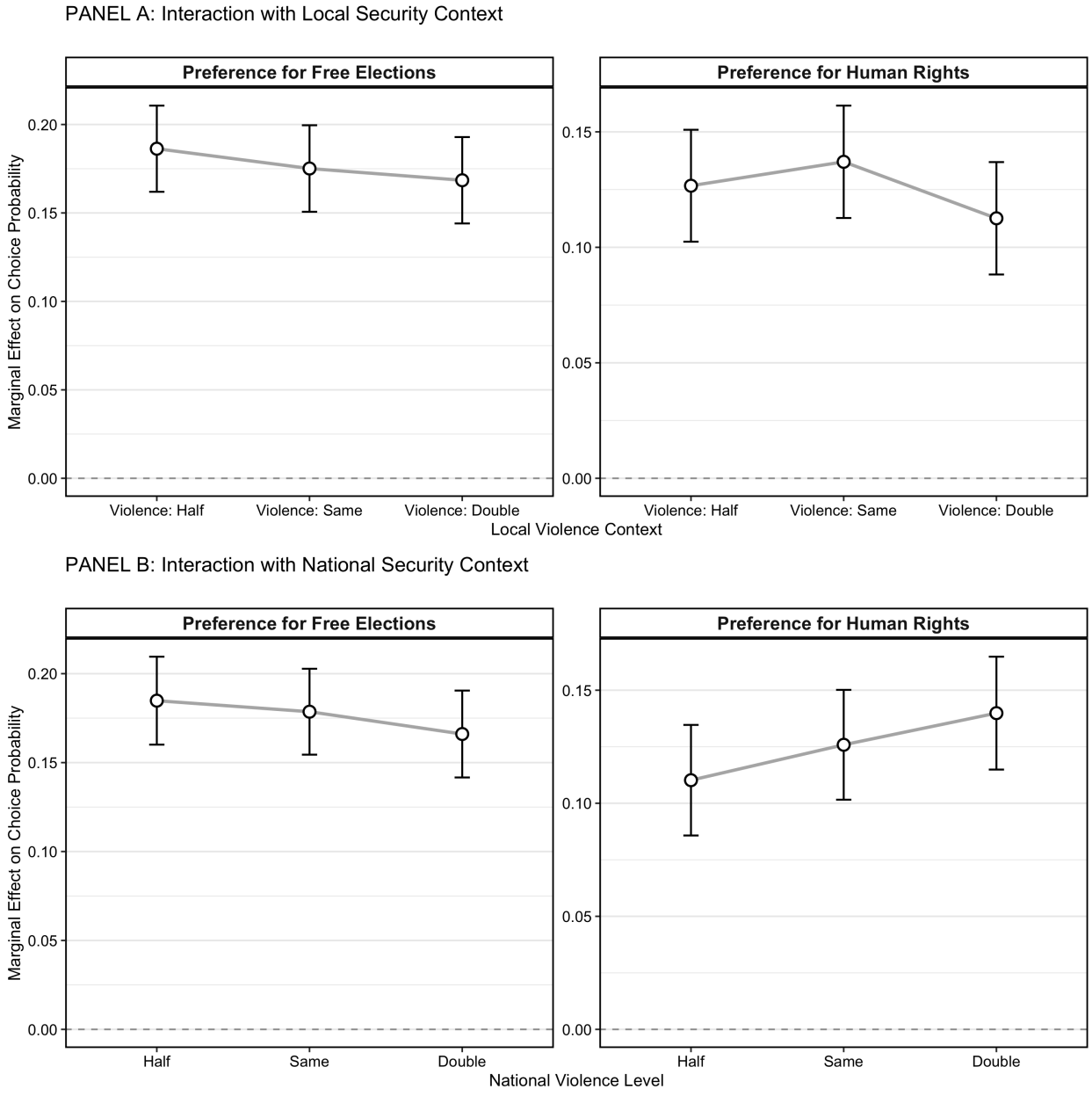
5.2 Is There a Faustian Bargain?

The main results establish that Mexican voters value democracy far more than security improvements. But a natural concern is whether this commitment holds *under pressure*: do democratic preferences erode as violence escalates? If citizens treat democracy and security as substitutes, we would expect the marginal value of democratic attributes to decline as violence worsens—a Faustian bargain in which deteriorating security leads voters to sacrifice democratic principles for the promise of order.

We test this directly by estimating interaction effects between the democratic attributes (free elections and due process) and the violence conditions (local and national), examining whether the marginal effect of democratic institutions on choice probability varies across violence contexts. The results, shown in Figure 3, provide no evidence of such a tradeoff.

The top panel of Figure 3 displays how the marginal value of free elections and human rights varies across local violence conditions. For free elections, the marginal effect remains positive and

Figure 3: Is there a Tradeoff between Democracy and Security?



stable across all three conditions—approximately between 0.17 and 0.19. The confidence intervals overlap substantially, and we cannot reject the null hypothesis of no difference across conditions. Voters value free elections about equally regardless of whether local violence is low, stable, or severe. For human rights, the pattern is similar in its overall stability, though a suggestive down-

ward shift emerges at doubled violence (from approximately 0.14 to 0.12). This directional pattern is consistent with a proximity-based threat logic: when violence is nearby and acute, some respondents may be marginally more willing to countenance rights restrictions in the name of security.

The bottom panel tells a subtly different story. Free elections again show remarkable stability—a gentle decline from approximately 0.19 to 0.17 as national violence increases, with fully overlapping confidence intervals. The democratic election premium is robust regardless of how violence is framed. For human rights, however, the pattern reverses relative to the local violence interaction: the marginal effect of due process *increases* slightly as national violence rises, from approximately 0.11 at halved violence to 0.14 at doubled violence. While this difference is not statistically significant, the directional contrast with the local violence result is substantively suggestive.

One plausible interpretation is that the source of the perceived threat shifts with the scale of violence. When violence is framed as a local problem, the threat is primarily attributed to non-state actors—criminal organizations and gangs—and respondents may be marginally more open to aggressive policing, even at some cost to due process. When violence is framed as a national crisis, however, it may activate concerns about state capacity and state overreach. In a country where the federal government has deployed the military in domestic security operations for nearly two decades, a scenario of doubled national violence may signal not just criminal threat but the failure—or potential abuse—of state power. In that context, demanding human rights protections becomes a rational response to anticipated state overreach rather than a concession to insecurity. Mexico's experience with enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and high-profile cases of state violence lends credibility to this interpretation.

Taken together, the interaction analyses reinforce the central finding: Mexican voters continue to value democratic institutions and legality under adverse security scenarios. Where variation appears, it is better characterized as mild reweighting—and it differs by whether insecurity is experienced as proximate (local) or diffuse (national)—rather than a broad willingness to forfeit

democracy for security. A Faustian bargain, it appears, is one Mexican voters are unwilling to make.

5.3 Heterogeneity in Preferences

The aggregate results paint a clear picture of democratic resilience, but they may mask important variation across segments of the population. We therefore disaggregate the conjoint results along several dimensions: region, crime victimization, municipal violence levels and trajectories, sociodemographic characteristics, vote choice, and trust in institutions. The pro-democracy finding is robust across all subgroups, but there are meaningful differences in the degree to which certain groups weigh security relative to democratic attributes. This heterogeneity sheds light on the conditions under which the Faustian bargain becomes more plausible.

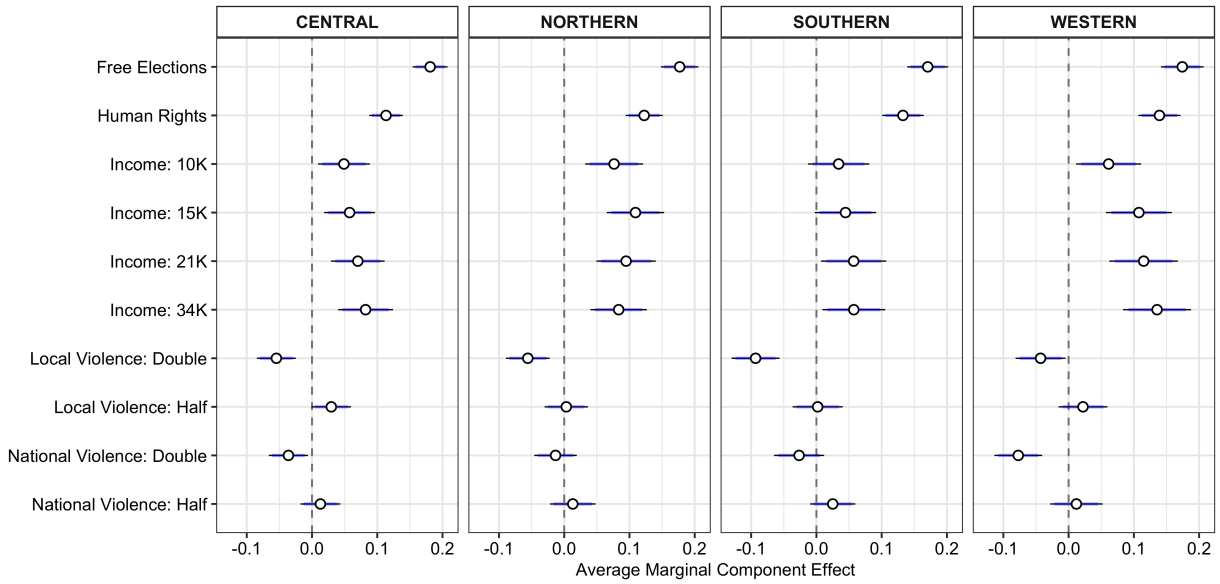
5.3.1 Regional Heterogeneity

Mexico's regions vary considerably in their exposure to drug-related violence and in their political dynamics. One might expect respondents in areas historically characterized as drug-trafficking strongholds to place greater weight on security conditions. Contrary to this expectation, our analysis reveals that respondents in these regions do not assign significantly more importance to security relative to those in calmer areas (Figure 4), a finding that is in tension with some existing research (Hiskey, Malone and Diaz-Dominguez, 2020).

Across all regions, the democratic attributes dominate. Halving municipal or national violence does not produce statistically reliable gains, but doubling municipal violence carries clear penalties everywhere—with the largest magnitude in the South, suggesting heightened sensitivity to local deterioration where baseline insecurity is already high. Doubling national violence is penalized in the Central and especially the Western region, but is statistically indistinguishable from zero in the North and South. Crucially, in every region the bonuses for free elections and due process exceed the penalties from doubling either municipal or national violence. Again, taken

together, these patterns indicate *loss aversion* with respect to security: deterioration (particularly local) is salient and costly, while improvements yield at best modest gains that are not reliably distinguishable from zero in these subgroup estimates.

Figure 4: Effects by Region



5.3.2 Crime Victimization

The experience of crime victimization is theorized to be among the strongest predictors of attitudinal shifts toward authoritarian measures. We divided respondents by whether they or their immediate family had been victims of severe violence—armed assault, kidnapping, extortion, or similar crimes—over the past year. As shown in Figure 5, both groups strongly prefer democratic attributes, but the comparison reveals telling differences.

Victims exhibit a slightly larger bonus for free elections than non-victims, suggesting that direct exposure to violence does not erode electoral commitment. The due process premium, however, is notably lower among victims (approximately 0.10 vs. 0.14 for non-victims), indicating that those who have suffered violence place a weaker marginal value on rights protec-

tions even as their support for elections remains high. This asymmetry between elections and due process among victims is consistent with the logic that personal experience of crime shifts preferences specifically toward permissiveness regarding how security is enforced, without undermining support for democratic governance writ large. Material payoffs also loom larger for victims: the income gradient is steeper, particularly at the top of the distribution, suggesting that victimization heightens the salience of both security and economic well-being.

The security attributes display a consistent pattern: respondents punish deterioration more than they reward improvement, and this asymmetry is stronger among victims. When local violence doubles, the negative effect on choice probability is larger for victims than for non-victims, indicating an acute and understandable desire for security among those who have directly suffered its absence. These findings offer an interesting contrast with evidence from Brazil, where Masullo, Krakowski and Morisi (2025) report increased support for unlawful enforcement practices without corresponding shifts in attitudes toward democracy as a form of government.

We further probe whether victimization conditions the democracy–security tradeoff by estimating interaction effects separately for victims and non-victims (Figure 6). Among non-victims, the patterns largely mirror the full-sample results: the marginal value of both free elections and human rights remains relatively stable across violence conditions. Among victims, however, a suggestive pattern emerges. In the local violence interaction, victims show a more pronounced downward slope in human rights preferences as violence doubles—consistent with the idea that those who have directly experienced crime are more willing to countenance aggressive policing when the threat feels proximate and severe. For free elections, victims actually show a somewhat higher marginal effect across all conditions, reinforcing the idea that victims make a meaningful normative distinction between the two democratic pillars in the experiment: the electoral commitment (which victimization strengthens) and the due-process commitment (which it may erode at the margins).

In the national-violence interaction, both victims and non-victims maintain a strong and con-

sistent preference for free elections. By contrast, victims place less value on human rights protections than non-victims, although this lower valuation does not vary significantly across national security conditions. This pattern suggests that national-level insecurity activates a different set of considerations than local insecurity: when violence is framed as systemic, changes in national violence do little to shift victims' relative priorities. But when violence is framed as proximate and local, victims' support for procedural protections appears more conditional—consistent with the idea that immediate threats can make rights constraints feel less compelling. These findings also align with prior research showing that victimization can erode confidence in the state's ability to provide security and, in some cases, increase openness to *mano dura* approaches.

Figure 5: Effects by Victimization Status

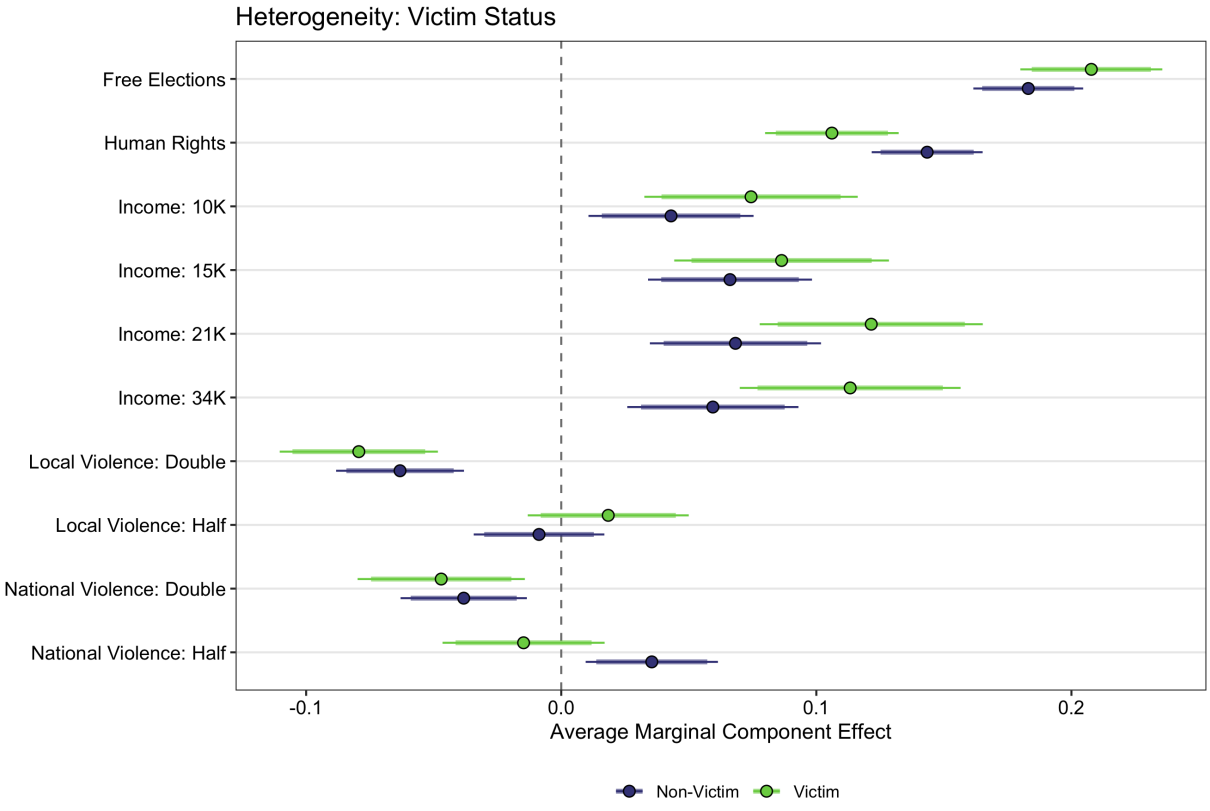
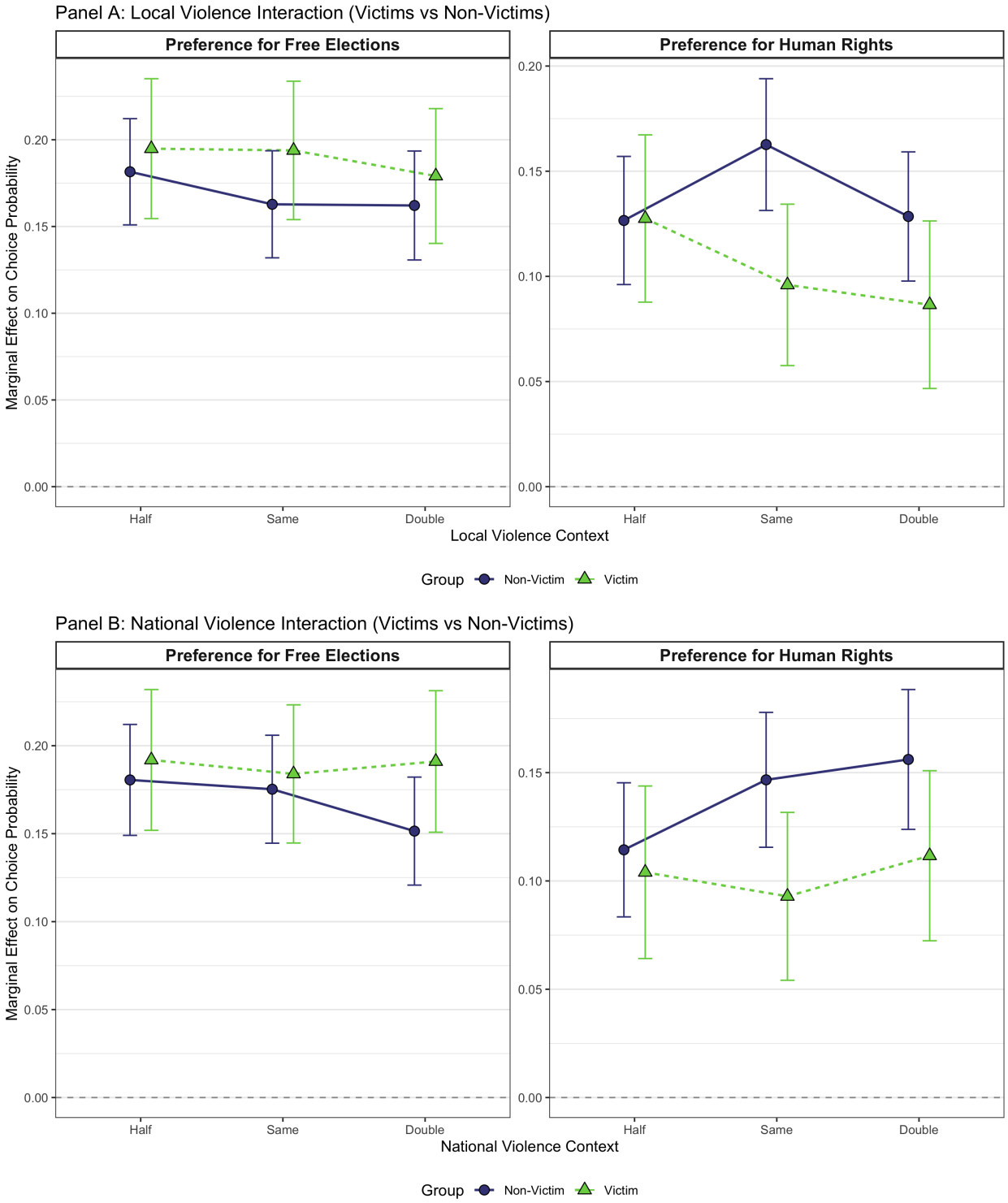


Figure 6: Is there a Tradeoff between Democracy and Security among Victims?



5.3.3 Municipal Violence Levels and Trajectories

Following the WHO/PAHO epidemiological convention that homicide rates at or above 10 per 100,000 constitute an epidemic threshold, and consistent with regional practice, we classify municipal homicide rates as low (< 10), medium (10–30), and high (> 30) per 100,000 for 2024 based on INEGI data. These bins capture substantively meaningful variation in Mexico, where baseline lethality exceeds global averages.

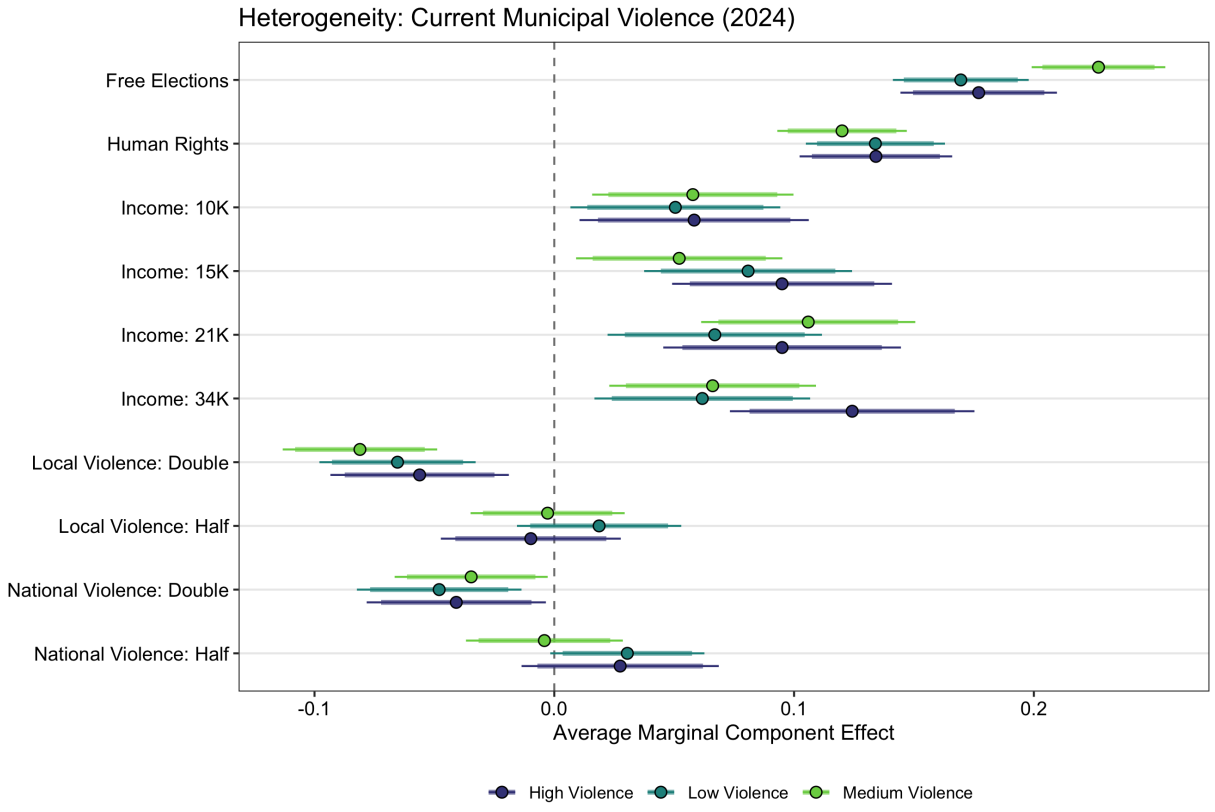
As Figure 7 shows, respondents across all municipal violence contexts display strong, stable preferences for democratic institutions and rights. A notable peak for free elections appears in medium-violence municipalities, possibly reflecting heightened salience of democratic governance where insecurity is present but not yet overwhelming. The security attributes follow the now-familiar pattern: doubling local violence is penalized in every setting, but reductions in violence are rewarded only in low-violence areas. For national violence, effects are smaller and more uniform: doubling is modestly penalized across all three groups, while halving produces no reliably distinguishable gains. Democracy and due process bonuses consistently exceed the penalties from worsening violence in all three contexts.

We also estimate interaction effects by municipal violence level to test whether the democracy–security tradeoff is more pronounced in high-violence settings (Figure 8). For free elections, the most striking finding is that respondents in high-violence municipalities show a steep downward slope as local violence increases—the marginal value of elections drops from approximately 0.20 when local violence is halved to around 0.14 when doubled. By contrast, respondents in low- and medium-violence municipalities maintain relatively stable preferences for elections across conditions. This suggests that in the most violent settings, escalating insecurity may begin to chip away at the electoral premium—a pattern not visible in the aggregate.

For human rights, the picture is more complex. In high-violence municipalities, preferences for due process are relatively stable across local violence conditions, while in low-violence municipalities the marginal effect of human rights actually increases sharply as local violence rises.

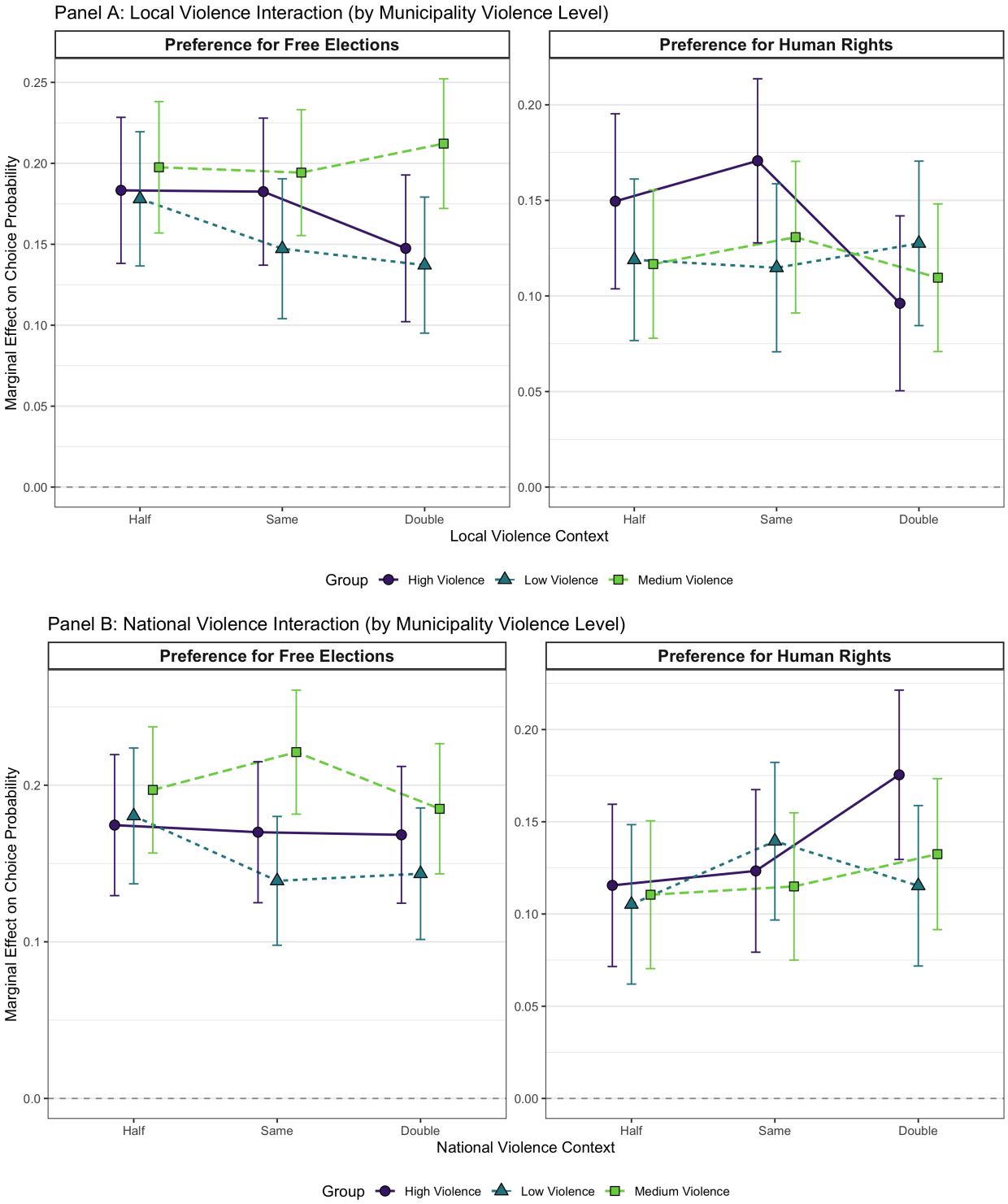
This counterintuitive finding may reflect the fact that respondents in currently peaceful areas, when confronted with a hypothetical doubling of violence, react by demanding stronger rights protections—perhaps because, lacking direct experience with severe insecurity, they do not view rights as an impediment to security. In the national violence interaction, the patterns are noisier but point in a similar direction: respondents in high-violence municipalities show the most pronounced downward slope for free elections as national violence doubles, while human rights preferences are relatively flat across conditions.

Figure 7: Effects by Municipal Violence (2024)



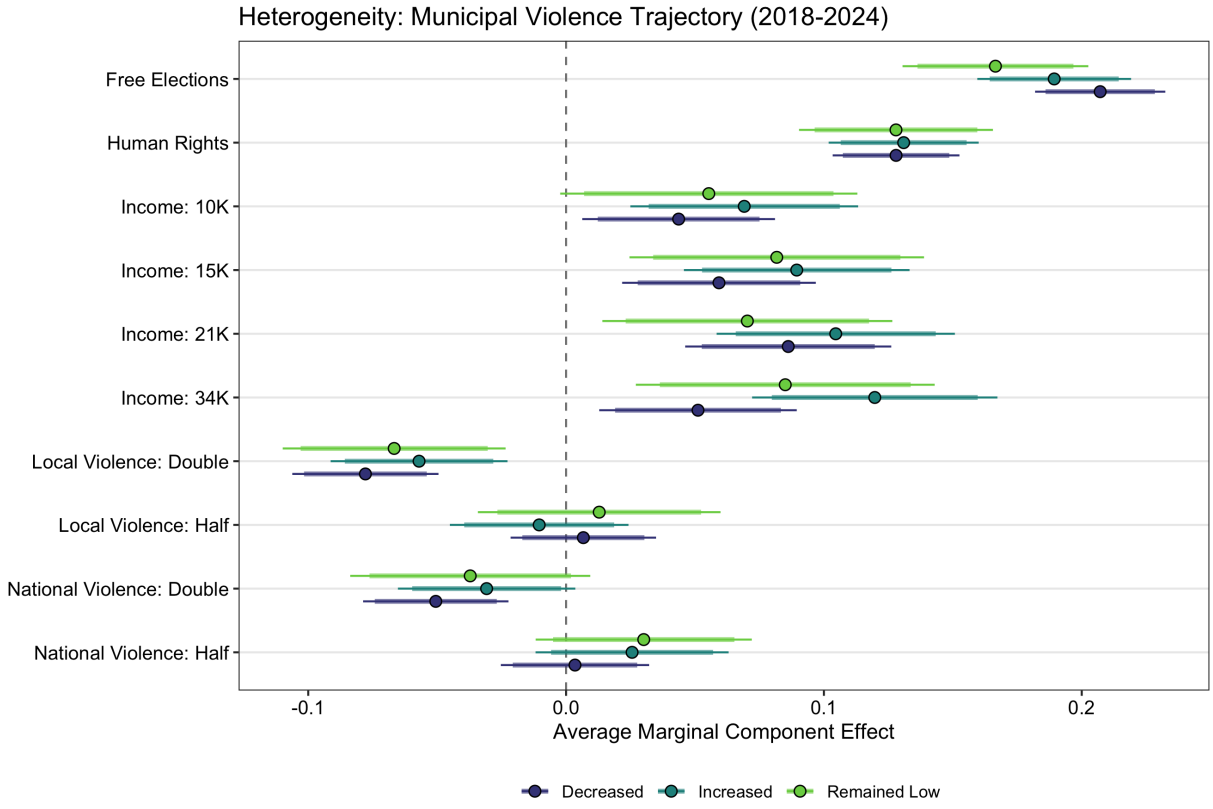
To evaluate whether preferences are shaped not only by current violence levels but also by their trajectories, we classify municipalities by changes in violence from 2018–2024, distinguishing between: municipalities that deteriorated to medium/high or remained high, municipalities where security improved, and municipalities that remained low in violence (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Is there a Tradeoff between Democracy and Security based on Municipal Violence?



Support for free elections is large and statistically significant in every group, peaking in municipalities where security conditions improved and remaining strong where violence worsened or stayed high. The smallest—yet still significant—democracy effect appears in stable-low contexts, where the salience of democratic governance may be lower precisely because institutions have not been tested by crisis. Due process effects are likewise positive and significant across trajectories, but somewhat smaller in places where violence has remained low.

Figure 9: Effects by Municipal Violence Trajectory, 2018–2024



The most intriguing finding concerns the security attributes. Doubling municipal violence is significantly penalized across all trajectory groups, with the strongest aversion in improving municipalities—consistent with heightened sensitivity to backsliding among communities that have recently achieved security gains. Reductions in municipal violence are suggestively rewarded in these improving municipalities, though the effect does not reach conventional sig-

nificance. National violence effects are generally weaker: only in improving municipalities do respondents significantly penalize national-level deterioration. Residents of places that have experienced recent security gains, it appears, are especially responsive to shifts in violence in either direction.

5.3.4 Sociodemographic Characteristics

Across sociodemographic groups, the pattern is strikingly consistent. Men and women, all age bands, and every schooling level show large, statistically precise preference for free elections and respect for human rights. Differences by sex and age are minimal, while the effect sizes rise modestly with education, reaching their highest among college-educated respondents. Material payoffs also matter broadly: the willingness to choose higher-income profiles increases monotonically, with a steeper slope among men and the highly educated.

Security evaluations exhibit the familiar asymmetry. Doubling municipal violence is punished in every group, with the strongest negative reaction among younger adults and men; increases in national violence are also penalized, though less sharply. By contrast, halving violence yields only small, often statistically indistinct gains regardless of subgroup. Education does little to alter these reactions. In sum, worsening security reliably reduces support for a profile across the population, improvements are weakly rewarded, democratic and legal commitments remain robust, and economic gains weigh most heavily for respondents with higher schooling (and, to a lesser extent, for men).

5.3.5 Vote Choice and Trust in Institutions

We examined preferences by respondents' vote choice in the 2024 presidential election (Figure 13). One might expect that supporters of the governing party—which has further militarized Mexico's public security apparatus—would be more open to scenarios with curtailed civil liberties than opposition supporters. The results do not bear this out. In fact, those who voted for the

incumbent party in the last election had a marginally higher penalty for "no free elections" in the conjoint than those who voted for an opposition party. Both groups show strong and comparable preferences for human rights, and neither displays meaningfully different reactions to violence conditions. This bipartisan consensus around democratic institutions is noteworthy given the depth of political polarization in contemporary Mexico.

Trust in the military reveals a more nuanced pattern (Figure 14). Respondents with medium levels of trust in the armed forces display the largest preference for free elections, while those with either low or very high trust place somewhat less weight on democratic institutions. The lower democratic premium among high-trust respondents may reflect confidence that the military would use force appropriately, reducing the perceived stakes of democratic safeguards. The lower premium among low-trust respondents is harder to interpret but may capture a broader disillusionment with institutions that extends to democratic ones. Critically, however, even at both extremes of military trust, respondents did not favor torture or dictatorship—the democratic attributes remain positive and significant across all groups.

Summary

The heterogeneity analysis reinforces the central finding while sharpening it in important ways. Democratic commitments in Mexico are broad-based across regions, demographics, political affiliations, and security contexts. Where variation exists, it follows a coherent pattern: populations with direct exposure to violence—crime victims, residents of the most violent municipalities—show a greater willingness to compromise on due process, though not on elections. The distinction matters: it suggests that insecurity does not erode support for democracy *per se*, but can shift preferences specifically regarding *how* security is enforced. This selective erosion, concentrated in the rights dimension among the most affected, represents the closest approximation to a Faustian bargain in our data. Yet even among these groups, democratic attributes retain their primacy. The potential for a broader shift exists—particularly if violence were to escalate well

beyond current levels—but as of 2024, that threshold had not been reached for the vast majority of Mexican citizens.

6 Discussion

What do these results imply for the broader debate on the relationship between security and democracy? First, our study provides evidence against the notion that there is an inherent zero-sum tradeoff where publics will readily abandon democracy when faced with insecurity. In the context of Mexico, often portrayed as a democracy "under siege" by criminal violence, we find that democratic elections and basic due process rights retain strong popular support. This aligns with comparative research that has emphasized the resilience of pro-democratic preferences: for example, even amid global concerns of democratic backsliding, large majorities around the world continue to profess support for democracy in principle (Neundorf et al., 2024). Despite Mexico's high levels of violence, citizens overall did not yield to an authoritarian temptation in our experiment. Democracy, it appears, is not so easily expendable.

However, our findings also add important nuance to this optimistic view. We do detect currents of what we might term "conditional authoritarianism"—pockets of public opinion that could support undemocratic measures under certain conditions. This is evidenced by the heterogeneity: people directly scarred by violence, or living in chaos, exhibit more willingness to sacrifice aspects of democracy for security. This nuance helps reconcile our results with prior observational studies that found high crime can erode democratic attitudes (Carreras, 2013; Fernandez and Kuenzi, 2010). For instance, surveys in Latin America have shown that fear of crime correlates with greater tolerance for strongman rule or even coup justifications. For example (Blanco and Ruiz, 2013) found in Colombia that insecurity and victimization significantly decreased trust in democracy.

Our experiment suggests that such attitudinal shifts do not necessarily equate to a majority wanting dictatorship, but rather a greater openness to iron-fist policies that might infringe on

rights. In Mexico, we see that reflected in the smaller but noticeable subset of respondents who, for example, did not completely reject a scenario with no elections if it came with major security and income benefits. They were few, but non-negligible. This resonates with the idea of an "authoritarian minority" within democratic societies—a concept also noted by Adserà, Arenas and Boix (2023), who found a minority in each surveyed country willing to trade away democracy given enough incentive. In stable contexts, that minority remains marginalized, but in contexts of crisis, it could become politically significant.

How do our results compare with the real-world trajectory of Mexico and similar countries? In practice, Mexico's successive governments have increasingly opted for militarized security strategies that have not been efficacious regarding violence reduction or even territorial control. Yet, our evidence indicates the public's patience for outright undemocratic governance (like canceling elections or overtly tolerating torture) is low. This could explain why, despite the severity of the security problem, Mexico has not seen a successful authoritarian reversal or open public calls for abandoning elections. Mexicans may be frustrated, but they largely want solutions within democracy. Intriguingly, this generalized perception coexists with a government that, enjoying legislative supermajorities, has amended the constitution to eliminate or control horizontal checks (such as the Federal Institute of Access to Information or the Federal Judiciary), to empower the armed forces, and to aggrandize the executive power. Mexico is thus undergoing a process of erosion of the institutional pillars of democratic governance (Bermeo, 2016), persistent high levels of crime and violence, but simultaneously the people exhibit considerably large margins of support for the president, the governing party and democratic institutions.

El Salvador under Bukele offers an interesting contrast. El Salvador's public, after enduring years of extreme gang violence, swung sharply behind Bukele's illiberal crackdown. The difference may lie in just how desperate the security situation became and in leadership cues. In El Salvador, homicide rates were among the world's highest, and Bukele explicitly framed democracy as an impediment to security and got buy-in. Bukele's reduction in crime and violence has

been as impressive as his clear and progressive takeover of democratic institutions, to the point that after the recent electoral reform El Salvador is no longer a democracy according to institutional measures (Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland, 2010). Nonetheless, LAPOP surveys (2018, 2021) reveal that support for democratic governance increased under Bukele's leadership. In fact, the popularity of Nayib Bukele remains exceptionally high, as well as the appeal of his "mano dura" approach, as demonstrated by his landslide reelection in 2024. When citizens in El Salvador turn their attention from security to other issues and look for electoral alternatives to make them effective, it might be too late as they will probably realize they did enter a Faustian bargain.

In Mexico, violence is high but perhaps more geographically uneven, and no national leader has openly disavowed democracy. Actually, the concentration of power in the executive branch, and the dismantling of horizontal checks, have proceeded under an effective populist narrative aimed at fighting against the "privileges of a corrupt elite", economic redistribution, and revitalization of direct democracy. Thus, one interpretation is that Mexico has normalize a relative high level of violence and not reached a "tipping point" where the median voter prefers authoritarianism for security. Our data suggest that to reach that point would require even more extreme conditions (for instance, violence far beyond doubling current levels or dramatic economic collapse). In fact, using our results we can infer that the "price" of sacrificing democracy is extremely high for most Mexicans. Preliminary indications are that the decrease in violence that would make a majority indifferent to having democracy are outside the realm of recent historical experience, affirming the robustness of democratic commitment.

Our findings suggests that Mexican citizens are not demanding a tradeoff; rather, they want both security and the preservation of democratic institutions. A large majority of the citizens positively perceive the efforts by the governments elected since 2018 in this regard. Our findings also imply that reforms that are perceived as strengthening police effectiveness, judicial accountability, and anti-crime programs will be welcomed. Whether moves that concentrate power or erode checks (such as prolonged military rule of policing) may face public resistance in the long

run depending on the dynamics of perceptions and the effectiveness of the security policies. Indeed, Mexico's high trust in its military coexists with, not a desire for military government, but an expectation that the military should help provide security within constitutional bounds. This, however, comes with a cautionary message: if the state fails to protect people, over time democratic ideals could weaken. We see hints of this in the more affected communities: people still prefer democracy, but their desperation for safety inches them closer to the tradeoff line. In the broader Latin American context, scholars have warned that unchecked violence can undermine support for democracy and drive people towards authoritarian solutions.

7 Conclusion

This study set out to examine the perceived tradeoffs between security and democracy in Mexico, a country facing one of the world's most severe internal security crises. Using a conjoint experiment with a large, representative sample, we assessed how Mexican citizens weigh democratic institutions, public safety, and economic conditions when forced to make choices between them. The resulting evidence offers several key contributions. First, we provide empirical support for the proposition that democracy, even in a context of insecurity, is highly valued by citizens. In our experiment, Mexicans overwhelmingly favored hypothetical societies that maintained free and fair presidential elections and respected human rights, over alternatives that offered greater security or prosperity at the cost of authoritarian governance. This suggests that the democratic norms instilled since Mexico's transition from one-party rule remain deeply ingrained: most people are not willing to accept a "Faustian bargain" of trading away their rights and voice in governance for the promise of order.

Second, our study sheds light on how security concerns shape (but do not overturn) these preferences. We found that while improved security is desired, it does not trump democracy for most respondents—however, deteriorating security has a particularly strong negative effect, and certain groups (notably victims of violence) exhibit a heightened prioritization of security. This

conditional effect is important for understanding the scenarios in which public opinion might shift toward illiberal solutions. Third, by incorporating attributes like due process, we highlight that citizens care about how security is achieved, not just how much crime there is. This nuance enriches the democracy-security discourse, indicating that a rule-of-law approach to security is part and parcel of what citizens consider a "good" society.

From a policy standpoint, our research speaks to Latin American democracies struggling with public security: the path forward is to strengthen the rule of law, not to suspend it. The public, as evidenced by the Mexican case, largely understands this. Policymakers should feel emboldened by the knowledge that there is not an inevitable public push for authoritarian solutions—on the contrary, people want their rights protected while security is restored. At the same time, leaders should not be complacent. The tolerance for democratic shortcomings is not unlimited. If institutions fail to curb violence and impunity, the resulting despair can be corrosive, creating opportunities for demagogues offering simplistic strongman fixes. Thus, the onus is on democratic governments to deliver on security in a way consistent with democratic values. Mexico's experiment of deploying the military while maintaining electoral democracy is a delicate balance; our findings suggest most citizens accept this balance insofar as it improves security and does not eliminate democratic governance. If that balance tips, public opinion could shift in undesirable ways.

In conclusion, the interplay of democracy and security in Mexico reflects a broader lesson for Latin America: democracy, to survive, must prove its efficacy, but citizens are not eager to jettison democracy even when efficacy is lacking. The Mexican people, much like others in the region, show a remarkable belief in the ideals of democracy as the best route to achieve safety and prosperity, rather than an obstacle to them. This belief is a bulwark against authoritarian regression. It is incumbent upon leaders and institutions to reward that belief by making democracy deliver—ensuring that courts function, police are accountable, and communities are protected. Our study's title evoked a "Faustian bargain," but the evidence suggests that most Mexicans are

not willing to make that deal. They seek security with democracy. The task ahead is to meet that demand, thereby strengthening both. The fate of democracy in Mexico and similar countries will hinge on whether governance can tackle the very real security issues without succumbing to undemocratic temptations. The public's stance, as we have shown, provides a mandate for pursuing just that difficult, but necessary, equilibrium.

Figure 10: Effects by Gender

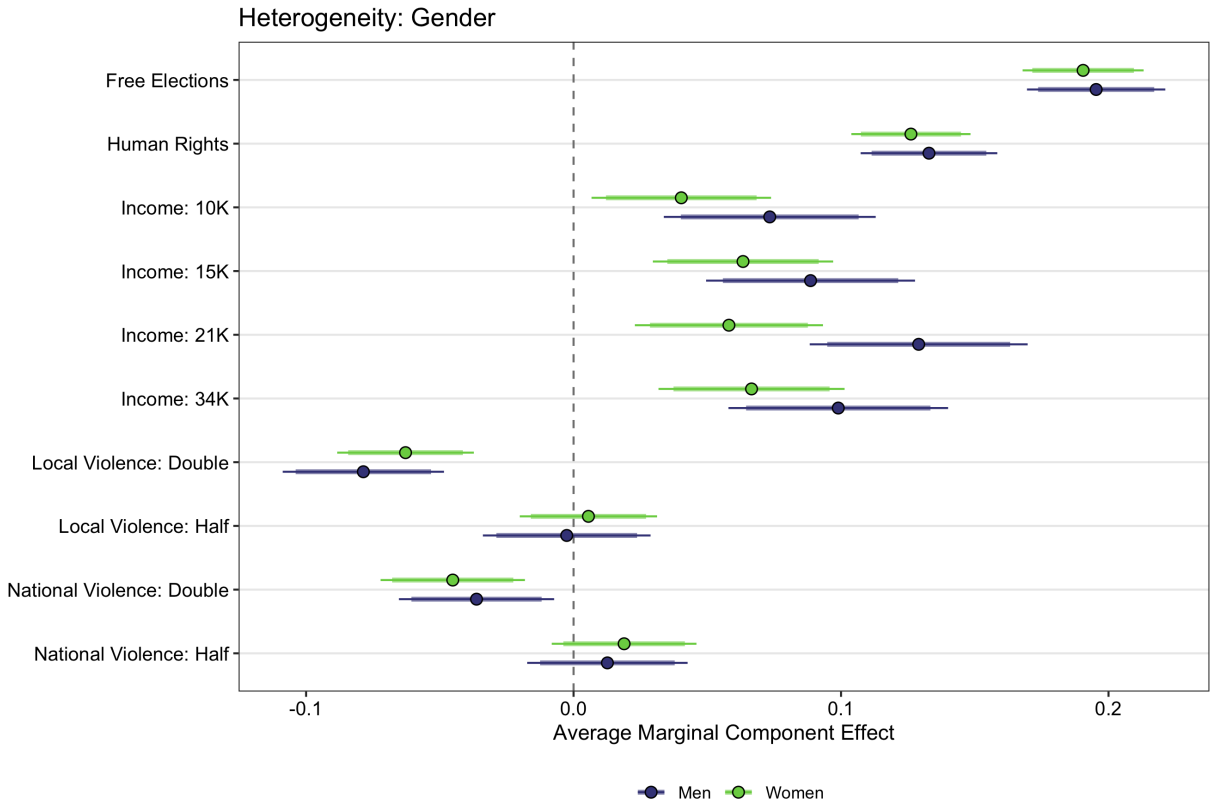


Figure 11: Effects by Age

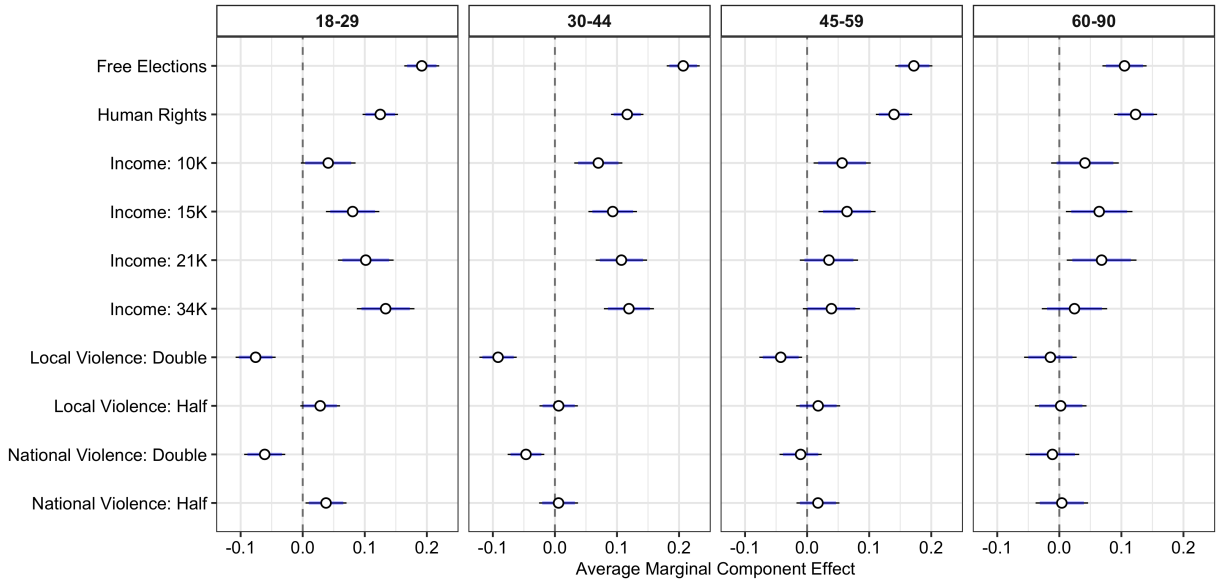


Figure 12: Effects by Education

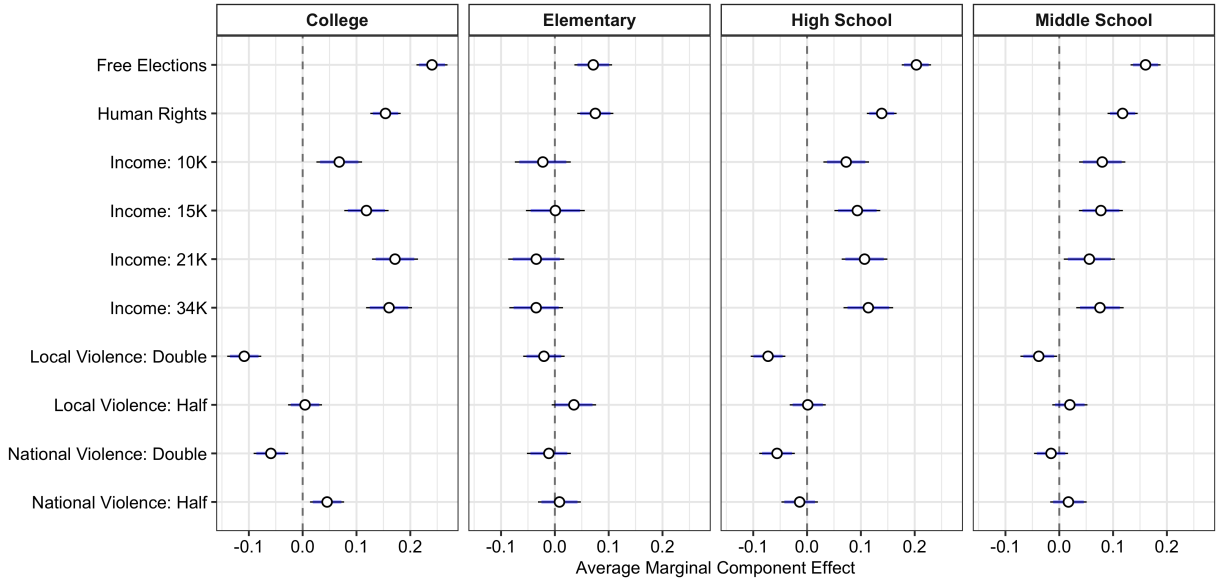


Figure 13: Effects by Vote Choice

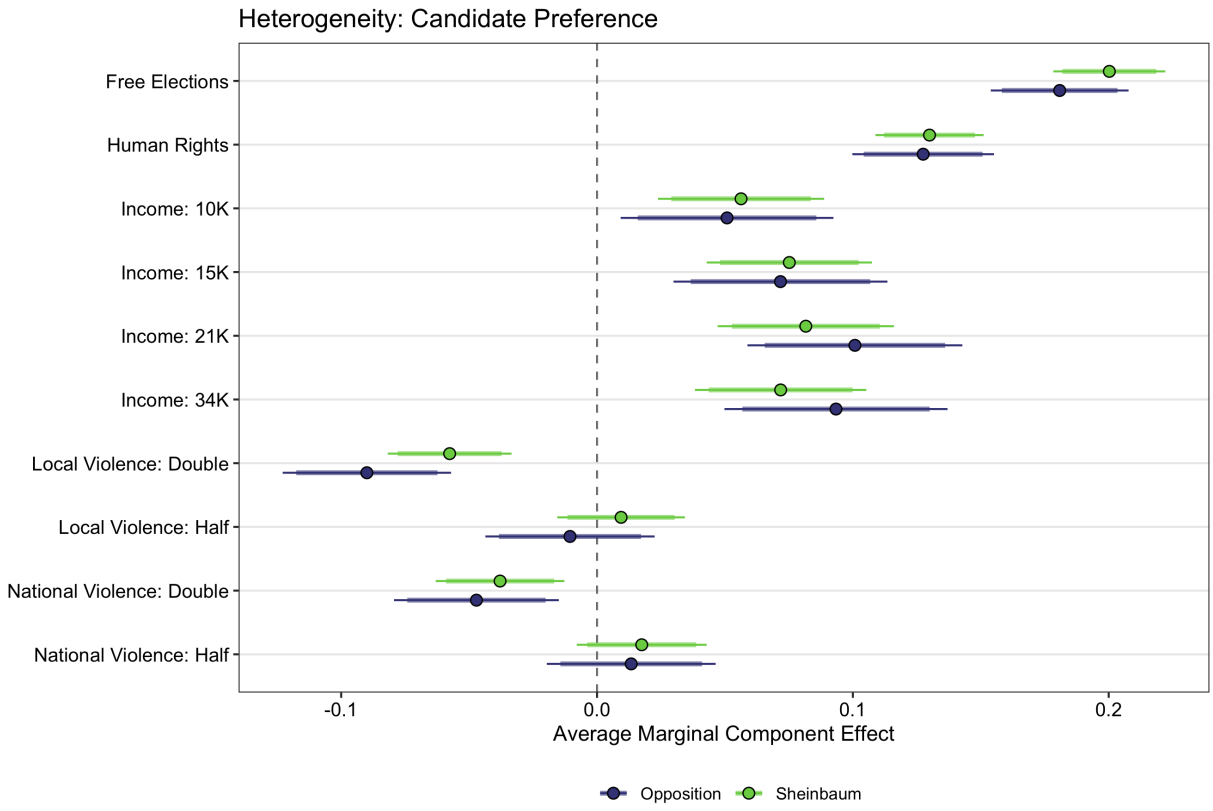
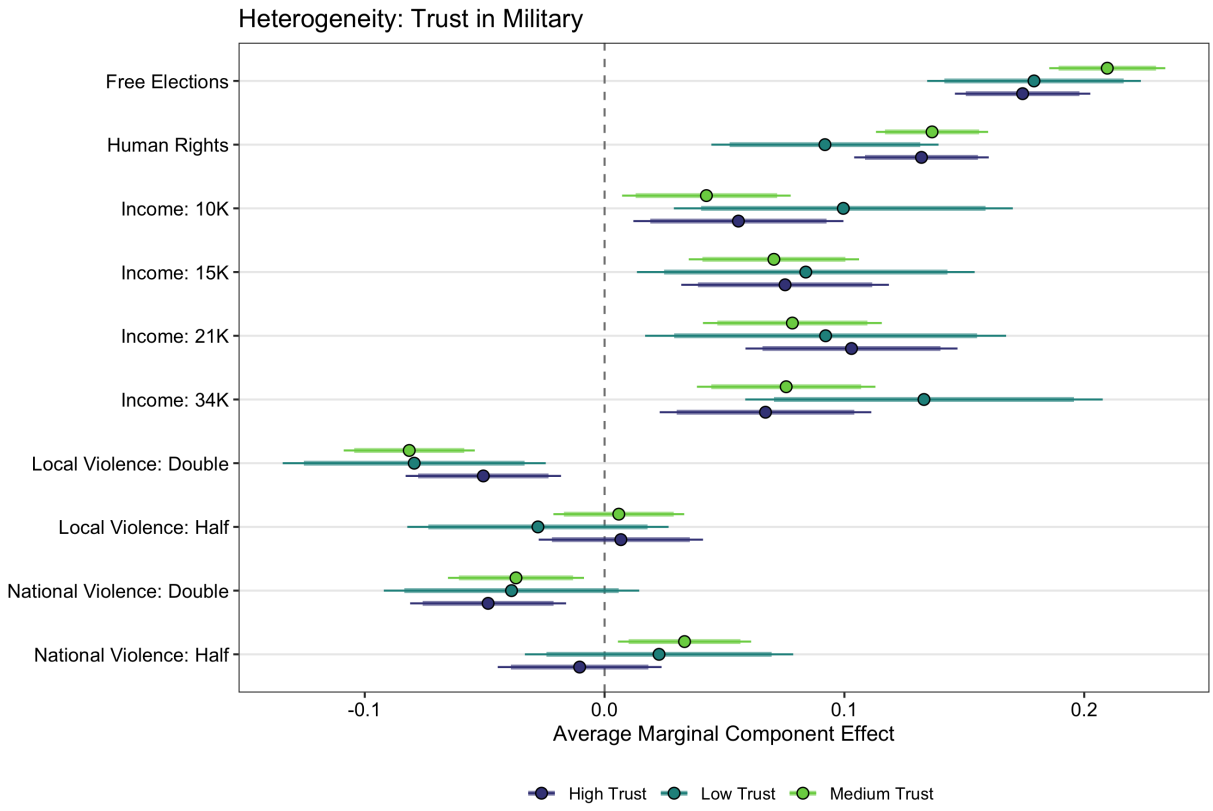


Figure 14: Effects by Trust in the Military



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