

Fixing the Past: The Effects of Human Rights Trials on Political Attitudes in Argentina

Pearce Edwards[†] Jennifer Gandhi[‡] Donald Grasse[§]

May 7, 2024

Abstract

Does prosecuting perpetrators of state violence under dictatorship promote public support for human rights and the courts? We argue that convicting perpetrators in human rights trials reduces public acceptance of these violations. However, courts in transitional settings may be imperfect messengers: while convictions signal judicial efforts to end impunity, they may also call attention to the politicized process by which transitional justice begins. We estimate the effects of human rights trial verdicts on attitudes in Argentina, a country ruled by military dictatorship from 1976-1983 that, twenty-five years later, initiated sweeping human rights trials for past repression. Using observational day-level opinion data from a survey fielded around the guilty verdict for one of the dictatorship's top-ranking generals, we find the trial verdict increased public rejection of torture and political killings. Yet belief in judicial fairness declined. These results suggest that trials solidify public commitments to human rights, but confidence in the judiciary is not a necessary condition for this effect.

*

[†]Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Louisiana State University

[‡]Professor, Department of Political Science and Jackson School of Global Affairs, Yale University

[§]Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Government, Cornell University

Introduction

New democracies choose to deal with the authoritarian past in very different ways, from “forgetting” to engaging in various forms of transitional justice (Aguilar, Balcells and Cebolla-Boado, 2011; Nalepa, 2010; Elster, 1998). Since the latter part of the 20th century, transitional justice approaches have proliferated in former dictatorships (González-Ocantos, 2020). One increasingly common approach is the criminal prosecution of the perpetrators of repression from the prior regime. In Latin America, trials of top leaders, such as Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Augusto Pinochet in Chile, have been accompanied by efforts to bring lower-level officials to justice, as in Argentina, our focus here.

Advocates of trials claim several benefits: justice and accountability, but also the creation of more forward-looking attitudes and behavior that can sustain new democracies (Nalepa, 2022). By prosecuting perpetrators, the state, especially the courts, demonstrates its seriousness in upholding higher standards for the protection of its citizens’ rights. Guilty verdicts in trials persuade citizens that repression is to be publicly rejected, remove from public life past perpetrators of human rights violations, and deter prospective perpetrators. This socialization and deterrence process may underlie the correlation between trials of agents of repression and stronger rights protection in country-level samples (Sikkink and Walling, 2007; Sikkink, 2011). As a result, we contend that guilty verdicts in human rights trials should increase public support for human rights norms.

Trials may solidify a commitment to human rights, but judiciaries may be imperfect messengers for human rights norms. On one hand, courts that convict perpetrators of repression may enhance their legitimacy through signaling adherence to the rule of law and ending impunity for human rights violations. On the other hand, in post-authoritarian settings, courts may have a history of manipulation by dictatorships, institutional weakness, and low levels of independence from new democratic executives (Dancy et al., 2019; González-Ocantos, 2016b). Trial verdicts may raise the salience of judicial weakness and politicization

for the public.. We argue that these contextual features could make guilty verdicts either increase or decrease public belief in judicial impartiality.

We evaluate these empirical expectations with data from Argentina, where a brutal military regime governed from 1976 to 1983. While the regime initially targeted “leftist subversives,” its repressive tactics engulfed many more, including an estimated 30,000 people disappeared or killed (Klor, Saiegh and Satyanath, 2021; Munck, 1998). Throughout this period, the judiciary largely failed to challenge the executive’s “Dirty War” (González-Ocantos, 2016*b*; Osiel, 1995), leaving Argentines to seek information and protection from non-state institutions, such as Catholic clergy and human rights groups (Edwards, 2023). Yet these trials also have revealed dictatorship-era social divisions in Argentina between citizens who prefer to “forget” the past and citizens who seek to continue its prosecution (Robben, 2012).

Using day-level survey data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project, we leverage the timing of the 2012 trial verdict of General Ramón Díaz Bessone to identify the effect of the verdict on public opinion towards human rights norms and trust in judicial institutions in Argentina. A hardline official with oversight of several detention centers, Díaz Bessone was accused of the murder of 11 individuals and the illegal arrest and torture of 51 others. Determining him guilty, the court sentenced him to life under house arrest even as his attorneys claimed the trial was politically motivated and using him as a scapegoat. The verdict came on March 26, 2012, and a strength of our design is the ability to identify respondents at the day level. We find that the verdict increased support for human rights norms against the use of torture and violence against social groups, offenses characteristic of the 1976-1983 Argentine dictatorship. The results withstand several robustness checks that address standard threats to inference in event study designs: testing for pre-trends and for balance between control and treatment groups. We also explore the possibility that the results are an artifact of social desirability bias, finding qualitative and quantitative evidence that alleviates this concern.

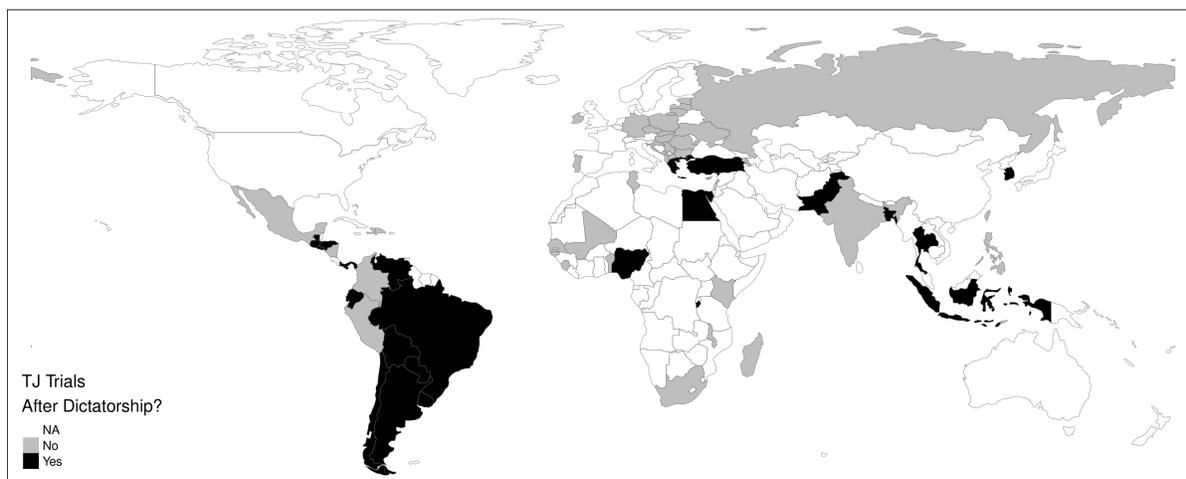
While increased support for human rights fits with accounts that emphasize how transitional justice socializes ordinary citizens into greater support for human rights norms (Sikkink, 2011; Sikkink and Walling, 2007), the verdict also decreased respondents' belief in the fairness of the judiciary. In this regard, our study speaks to recent research that examines the effect of transitional justice on attitudes towards democratic institutions (Balcells, Palanza and Voytas, 2022; González-Ocantos, 2016*a*). It moves beyond these important attitudinal studies of generalized public support to examine support for specific measures of transitional justice (Aguilar, Balcells and Cebolla-Boado, 2011; Gibson, Caldeira and Baird, 1998; Nalepa, 2012).

Trials may promote “Never Again” not only by demonstrating to public officials the consequences of repressive action, but also by socializing citizens into the value of upholding rights for all. Both of these channels underlie cross-national studies of the impact of trials on improved human rights outcomes in new democracies (Sikkink, 2011; Sikkink and Walling, 2007). However, to the extent that Argentines have been exposed to these “treatments” in the past, the case we study is a hard one: the Díaz Bessone verdict came after 67 trials that occurred in the space of six years. But the verdict's effect on attitudes towards human rights even after several years of trials also suggests that socialization into rights norms is an ongoing process. Moreover, guilty verdicts can surface deep skepticism about the institutions and processes that generate those judgments. When courts have a history of blowing with the political winds, their attempts to address the past may not help in garnering legitimacy in the democratic present. Authoritarian repression has enduring legacies that shape public attitudes towards politics and society in new democracies (Rozenas, Schutte and Zhukov, 2017; Rozenas and Zhukov, 2019; Osorio, Schubiger and Weintraub, 2018; Lupu and Peisakhin, 2017). Argentina's experience demonstrates that addressing these legacies is a long, intensive undertaking.

The Effect of Trials on Public Attitudes

New democracies can choose to deal with the authoritarian past in very different ways, including “forgetting” or uncovering information about victims and perpetrators (Elster, 1998; Nalepa, 2010). Julio Sanguinetti, the first civilian president after military rule ended in Uruguay in 1985, observed that “the best thing that can happen to the past is to leave it to the historians” (Lessa, 2013, 139). But many other countries have taken a different route. According to the Global Transitional Justice Dataset, of 82 countries that experienced a democratic transition after authoritarianism or civil conflict during the post-World War II period, 66 engaged in domestic prosecution of perpetrators of past repression (Boyd and Nalepa, 2023). One-third of the democracies undertaking the judicial route were preceded by a dictatorship with some degree of military involvement, with several of these cases located in Latin America.¹ We map the distribution of countries that had transitional justice trials after dictatorship in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Post-Authoritarian Transitional Justice Trials Cross Nationally



Note: Figure depicts cross-national occurrence of domestic prosecution of perpetrators of past repression under dictatorship in at least one year since 1945. Data are from Boyd and Nalepa (2023).

Human rights trials—the domestic prosecution of culpable state officials from author-

¹Besides Argentina, 11 cases occurred in the region: Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, Uruguay, Venezuela

itarian regimes—are often a controversial way to move forward because they involve clear accusations and punitive consequences. Skeptics cite these aspects of trials as the source of significant risk for political stability (Encarnación, 2008). The prospect of trials may deter authoritarian leaders from stepping down, and trials themselves may precipitate military intervention in politics. Trials also may be polarizing: evidence collection and testimony necessitates revisiting the past which may impede the ability of countries to move past the social and political divisions that characterized authoritarian rule (Huntington, 1993). For these reasons, trials arouse considerable opposition (Aguilar, Balcells and Cebolla-Boado, 2011). In a recent study of transitional justice measures in Chile, for example, Balcells, Palanza and Voytas (2022) found that trials were respondents’ least preferred measure.

Trial Verdicts and Human Rights Attitudes

Despite political contention around conducting human rights trials, these legal proceedings significantly improve state-level human rights protections once initiated. One explanation for this effect is deterrence: prosecuting culpable state officials shows other, prospective human rights violators the cost of carrying out state coercion. Sensitive to increasing costs of violating human rights, current and future officials are less likely to commit these violations—thereby making their states more pacific (Kim and Sikkink, 2010; Dancy et al., 2019). In particular, convicting culpable officials signals a “new political and legal order” that demonstrates arguments justifying human rights violations—such as the necessity of following orders, or states of national emergency—now lack merit in a court of law (Olsen, Payne and Reiter, 2010, 133). Underpinning this new legal order against impunity for human rights violations is a change in judicial norms: prosecutors, judges, and members of the state’s legal bureaucracy believe in the appropriateness of prosecutions and advocate for their continuation (González-Ocantos, 2016*b*; Dancy and Michel, 2016). Trials are thus a visible face of a wall of accountability confronting prospective human rights violators.

The public also receives and internalizes information from verdicts. While the oc-

currence of repression may be generally known, evidence presented in the courtroom may reveal previously concealed facts about specific cases as well as the scope and scale of state violence. When trials are preceded by truth commissions that reveal information about human rights violations under dictatorship, the trials still have an important purpose (Dancy and Wiebelhaus-Brahm, 2015). Trials, and judicial verdicts in particular, apply an explicit normative valence to perpetrators' actions that truth commissions lack. Courts that pass judgment on culpable state officials "[define] who constitutes a legitimate political actor on the new democratic stage" (Cesarini, 2010, 4). In marking the boundaries of appropriate action for state agents, trial verdicts communicate human rights norms to the public. The spillover of norms from courts to the public is part of a hypothesized justice cascade in which accountability measures reduce social acceptance of human rights violations (Sikkink and Walling, 2007; Sikkink, 2011). Guilty verdicts are part of public habitualization of human rights norms, which occurs when "the validity claims of the norm are no longer controversial" and the norm achieves a "prescriptive status" in society (Risse, Ropp and Sikkink, 1999, 29).

Impunity, in turn, conveys to the public the opposite: that violence committed by state actors is acceptable and possibly justifiable. In Chile, for example, both the Aylwin and Lagos administrations pursued transitional justice through truth commissions in order to satisfy the demands of victims of the military dictatorship under General Augusto Pinochet. Yet neither the Rettig nor the Valech Commissions ended calls for their governments to allow trials to continue through the judicial process. As an activist explained: "Impunity sends a very bad signal from an educational point of view, it is not healthy. It provides a very dangerous lesson for future generations" (Borzutzky, 2017, 100).

While the justice cascade approach to human rights trials provides a causal explanation for the improvement in rights protections through the mechanism of public rejection of violations, it rarely tests individual-level effects of trial verdicts. Applying this explanation

to the individual level, we argue that the immediate effect of guilty verdicts is to increase public rejections of the human rights violations associated with the perpetrator. Furthermore, the rejection of the perpetrator's actions should extend to the beliefs and actions of the dictatorship with which the perpetrator was associated. This is because, during human rights trials—especially those of high-ranking officials—the defendant stands as a symbolic representative of the past regime and its repressive policies. The public's exposure to information about repression with a normative valence in a verdict is comparable to exposure to state-funded human rights museums, which Balcells, Palanza and Voytas (2022) find is associated with increased rejection of the past regime. This produces the argument's first empirical implication that guilty verdicts in human rights trials will increase public support for human rights norms violated by the perpetrator and the associated regime.

Trial Verdicts and Attitudes toward Courts

Domestic human rights trials are the only form of transitional justice in which the courts become the central institution in conveying messages about the past regime to the public. Almost uniquely among political institutions, courts deliver messages wrapped in symbolism and imagery: verdicts are issued in formal language by a robed judge or panel of judges, surrounded by the choreographed rituals of a courtroom. Gibson, Caldeira and Baird (1998) contend that “to know [courts] is to be exposed to a series of legitimizing messages focused on symbols of justice, judicial objectivity, and impartiality” (345). By playing this role, the judiciary can garner increased public support for itself. Adhering to norms of procedural fairness can persuade defendants and victims (and their supporters) of the court's legitimacy. In his study of public attitudes during Fujimori's trial in Peru, González-Ocantos (2016*a*) finds that perceptions of procedural fairness are correlated with support for the court at the beginning of the proceeding. A guilty verdict with strict sentencing, in turn, may display the courts' autonomy from political pressure (Acuña and Smulovitz, 1997; Skaar, 2011) and their commitment to the rule of law (Davis, 2013; Sikkink and Walling, 2007). Especially for

courts that were subservient to executive power under dictatorship, the trials become a way to atone for the past, “to transform the perceptions of the traditionally subordinate role of the judiciary” (Layús, 2018, 64).

A judiciary that is new in its current form, unstable in its power or composition, or issues unpopular decisions, however, may face headwinds in enhancing its legitimacy through its verdicts. Politicization of the judiciary—that is, if the public comes to see judges as politicians or extensions thereof—decreases public perception of judicial fairness (Magalhães et al., 2023). Courts may be seen as neither politically neutral nor independent given their past behavior. Throughout military rule in post-war Latin America, for example, the judiciary regularly denied *habeas corpus*, hid behind political question doctrine, and acquiesced in the supremacy of military courts (Pereira, 2005; González-Ocantos, 2016*b*). Even after political transitions, the perception of institutional weakness may be difficult to dislodge when democratically elected executives also purge judges with whom they disagree, pack courts, and proscribe judicial review powers (Linzer and Staton, 2015; Helmke and Rosenbluth, 2009). Research on public attitudes towards corruption trials shows that perception of politicization can lead to mixed public reactions to these proceedings (Poertner and Zhang, 2023). Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. (2023) study the effects of judicial crusades against corruption on public attitudes, finding that pre-trial perceptions of judicial politicization can “diminish [the judiciary’s] ability to boost confidence in the system” when issuing verdicts against high-ranking officials (171). The perceived lack of judicial fairness, in turn, may undercut public support for transitional justice (González-Ocantos, 2016*a*).

Because guilty verdicts in human rights trials call attention to the judiciary—verdicts are typically read by judges in courtrooms in the presence of mass media—these decisions raise the salience of the judiciary. The normative valence of the court’s guilty verdict may find a receptive public and boost the institution’s perceived fairness. Alternatively, if the initiation and conduct of human rights trials are seen as inseparable from politics, the judiciary

may appear to be a less impartial institution. It is important to note that increased public acceptance of human rights norms is compatible with either view of the courts. Support for human rights norms and the courts may go together. But if ending impunity can only be achieved through an admittedly flawed judiciary, then the public also may believe the end justifies the means. Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. (2023), in the context of trying high-ranking officials for corruption, describe this as a tradeoff between accountability and the rule of law. This ambiguity leads to the implication that guilty verdicts in human rights trials may increase or decrease public belief in the impartiality of the judiciary.

Repression and Human Rights in Argentina, 1976-2017

The military regime that came to power in 1976 initially targeted for repression Argentines connected to left-wing politics: factions of the Peronist party, socialists and communists, student activists, and labor leaders (Klor, Saiegh and Satyanath, 2021; Munck, 1998). Military units such as Intelligence Battalion 601 received specific orders from the dictatorship to implement this campaign (Scharpf and Gläβel, 2020). But what was supposed to be a targeted war on subversion quickly expanded as the junta saw potential enemies everywhere. As Ibérico Saint Jean, governor of the Province of Buenos Aires at the time, explained: “First we will kill all the subversives, then we will kill their collaborators, then... their sympathizers, then... those who remain indifferent; and, finally, we will kill the timid” (Feitlowitz, 2011, 36). By the end of military rule, the regime had forcibly disappeared and killed up to 30,000 Argentines in what became known as the Dirty War (Romero and Brennan, 2013).

Judicial Advances and Limits, 1976-2005

Those targeted for repression received no protection from the courts. Within the first year of military rule, 400 writs of habeas corpus were filed each week in Buenos Aires alone; the national average per week was 800 (Feitlowitz, 2011, 185). With very few exceptions,

the judicial response was feeble: when the executive denied holding specific individuals, the courts simply ordered it “to conduct a thorough inquiry”—an order the executive routinely ignored (Osiel, 1995). The Argentine Supreme Court rebuffed any challenges to the military’s seizure of power by invoking the “political question” doctrine. The deference of the courts to the junta was not surprising given the judicial purge that occurred after the military’s seizure of power (González-Ocantos, 2016*b*; Osiel, 1995).

With the collapse of the regime—due to political and economic mismanagement and failed military adventurism in the Falkland/Malvinas Islands—demands for justice grew louder. Civilians began to file claims in the court system against officials responsible for repression, and elected president Raul Alfonsín arrested nine leaders of the *junta* (Mignone, Estlund and Issacharoff, 1984). The Trial of the *Juntas* that followed reverberated beyond the courtroom. Vezzetti (2007) described it as a conflict fought “in public opinion and the conscience of the Argentines” (29). The prosecution and their witnesses framed the victims of repression as citizens deprived of their universal human rights, while the defense took up the military’s claims that victims had forfeited such rights with their participation in subversive activity (Crenzel, 2008, 141). The trial shifted individuals’ attitudes toward human rights norms: one of the prosecutors’ mothers, who originally had supported the coup, said: “I still love [*junta* leader] Videla, but you’re right and he has to go to prison.” (Sikkink, 2011, 75).

At the conclusion of the trial, two leaders of the junta, Jorge Videla and Emilio Massera, received life sentences while the other seven defendants received lesser sentences or were acquitted (Speck, 1987). Yet President Alfonsín, under pressure from the military establishment, passed the Full Stop Law, halting trials in December 1986 (Esparza, 2022). Dissatisfaction with initial trials emerged among both supporters and opponents of the dictatorship alike. The former viewed military defendants as “scapegoats” while the latter believed the trials were too few and the sentences too light, failing to deliver real accountability. “For both parties, the trials were ‘clearly political’: far from being seen to administer justice,

the judiciary was widely perceived to have merely adjusted to the political convenience of the executive” (Malamud-Goti, 1996, 18-19). The following year, Congress passed the Due Obedience Law, exempting subordinates from prosecution when they were following orders. In 1989, Alfonsín’s successor Carlos Menem commuted all sentences handed down in the immediate period after the dictatorship (Nino, 1991). Though progress within the justice system halted, public opinion had shifted in favor of accountability by the end of the 1980s: a majority of Argentines opposed Menem’s commutations (Vezzetti, 2007).

Alfonsín’s government also faced the issue of what to do with a judiciary that had so compromised itself during the dictatorship. Towards the end of the military regime, when a transition seemed increasingly apparent, the courts had begun to shift course in habeas corpus cases (Helmke, 2005). Yet their rulings were ignored, and the courts carried a reputation for having been largely ineffectual during the worst periods of repression (González-Ocantos, 2016*b*). Consequently, Alfonsín’s government decided that judges who had served under military rule had no security of tenure (constitutional guarantees notwithstanding). All judges would have to be reconfirmed by the Senate in closed door proceedings. Of the judges who went through the reconfirmation process, nearly 70 percent retained their posts (Zunino, 2019). Yet the degree to which judges loyal to the dictatorship were purged varied quite significantly. For judges serving in Buenos Aires, where publicity was higher, the government made an effort to ensure that the judges on the bench were liberal and pro-transitional justice. The same was not the case in most interior provinces where conservative anti-transitional justice judges continued to stymie any attempts at redress through the courts (González-Ocantos, 2016*b*). Given the government’s moves to legislate amnesty, even judges sympathetic to the victims found it difficult to move their cause forward.

Smulovitz (2002) describes the dual effects of this initial phase of Argentine transitional justice under Alfonsín. For human rights norms, the evidence that witnesses presented during the Trial of the *Juntas* created an effective “historical and political judgment of the

dictatorial regime” (252). For judicial independence, the pursuit of accountability for human rights violations turned courts in the new democracy into “an arena for disputes between the government and its opposition” (260) with frequent executive interventions into the judicial system. By the mid-1990s, public support for the Argentine judiciary had plummeted: 89% of Argentines expressed no or low confidence in the courts, up from 42% in the first year of the democratic transition. Human rights organizations and the victims they represented, however, saw an opportunity to advance norms in a politicized judiciary. In the 1990s and early 2000s, politicization allowed these groups to use courts as an instrument to secure rights protections (Smulovitz, 2002, 260).

A Justice Cascade: 2006-2017

Advocacy by human rights organizations, in tandem with legal and political strategies of sympathetic prosecutors, judges, and elected officials, ultimately led the Argentine Supreme Court to declare the amnesty laws unconstitutional in 2005 (González-Ocantos, 2016*b*). Prosecutions of perpetrators - from all ranks, branches of service, and geographic areas - began in earnest. Defendants ranged from General Luciano Menéndez, who oversaw repressive operations in five different provinces, to Jorge Magnacco, a medical doctor implicated in a scheme to kidnap infants from female detainees. Our data on trials from 2006 to 2017 indicates 183 different trials with almost 1200 named defendants pertaining to the repression of more than 5800 persons during the dictatorship.² Trials are oral and public, like other criminal trials, involving the testimony of witnesses who are typically survivors of repression and the opportunity for cross-examination by lawyers for the defendants. Nine hundred and seventy eight guilty verdicts were handed down during the 2006-2017 period, ranging from two years to life in prison. Acquittals, deaths of defendants, and unknown locations of defendants accounted for the remaining outcomes.

²Trials are ongoing, having recently expanded to more prosecutions of civilians who collaborated with the military in carrying out repression.

Historical and sociological studies of the Argentine trials suggest the importance of the outcomes to repairing social solidarity damaged during the dictatorship. Layús (2018) argues that trials “not only [have] an impact on the victims but also on other parts of society and can resonate in the everyday lives of all those who are affected” (26). This resonance “[incorporates] the narratives of victims into the collective memory of the dictatorship” (Davis, 2013, 17) particularly with respect to the human rights violations which occurred. Additionally, trial verdicts are expected to reinforce trust in the judiciary, shaking off the courts’ reputation for being unwilling to challenge the military both during and after the dictatorship (Layús, 2018). Yet for some observers, when the Argentine courts shook off this reputation, they veered from one extreme to the other. A “deep politicization” of the bench resulted from activists’ efforts to select and vet judges with attitudes consistent with prosecuting human rights violations (González-Ocantos, 2016*b*), and exposed disagreements among Argentines on the scope and rationale for prosecutions (Robben, 2012; Barros and Morales, 2017).³

Descriptive surveys have documented Argentines’ disagreements over transitional justice. Arnosó Martínez et al. (2015) find that while more than 90% of Argentines were familiar with the country’s transitional justice processes, only 49.8% believed it necessary to talk about past human rights violations. Similar divisions persisted in attitudes toward the military and transitional justice: 47.8% believed in the sincerity of any apologies offered by perpetrators of repression, and just 22.2% believed apologies aided reconciliation. These dueling perspectives heightened social conflict over transitional justice: few (13.8%) Argentines believed these accountability measures created feelings of solidarity and trust. It is identifying how trials shape these diverging attitudes toward transitional justice—seen both as justice and yet an inherently politicized process—to which we turn in our analysis.

³For example, some Argentine judges generated disagreement by interpreting international law to apply more broadly to repression than any previous domestic or international tribunal (O’Donnell, 2009).

Empirical Strategy: The Díaz Bessone Verdict

Our empirical approach exploits the timing of the verdict from a notable Argentine human rights trial: the conviction and sentencing of General Ramón Díaz Bessone, a high-level official who served as the regime's Minister of Planning from 1976-1977, the commander of the army's Second Corps, and a leading ideological proponent of repression during the Dirty War. Díaz Bessone's trial began in July 2010 as part of a broader case about the activities of the Servicio de Informes, a division of the Argentine police responsible for up to 2000 disappearances during the dictatorship (El Litoral, 2010). Multi-year proceedings followed, involving the testimony of more than 150 witnesses, repeated efforts by the defense to declare Díaz Bessone physically unfit to stand trial, and public complaints from his attorneys that a politicized judicial process was scapegoating him for society's broader participation in the Dirty War (El Ciudadano, 2012). Finally, on March 26, 2012, the federal court in the city of Rosario convicted Díaz Bessone and sentenced him to life under house arrest. Four co-defendants received sentences, and one civilian co-defendant was acquitted. Human rights groups gathered to celebrate the outcome.

The trial verdict received wide publicity, including live-streaming of the verdict on the state government's website and extensive press coverage. The verdict made the front page of *La Nación*, one of the nation's largest newspapers in terms of readership. In addition, EFE, the world's largest Spanish-language wire service, disseminated news of the verdict, reaching smaller outlets not only in Argentina, but throughout Latin America. Public interest in Díaz Bessone also surged at the time of the verdict, reaching a level it had not since the onset of the trial and initial testimony.⁴

⁴Measurable public interest in the verdict is described in greater detail below, and in Appendix A.2.2.

Data

Díaz Bessone’s verdict occurred during the 2012 Argentina country survey of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). We treat the revelation of the guilty verdict as an exogenous intervention wherein subjects interviewed after March 26 were exposed to information about the successful prosecution of a high-ranking agent of repression from the previous regime.⁵ We assume the outcome was unknown *ex ante*, due to the adversarial nature of the trial proceedings, and was commonly known *ex post*, due to the high profile nature of the trials verdict. Since we did not manipulate the treatment and have no direct measure of individuals’ awareness of the trial, our estimates represent an intention-to-treat (ITT) effect.⁶

The data source is the LAPOP interviews, which were face-to-face encounters conducted in Spanish between March 3 and April 4, 2012. The survey interviewed 45 respondents per day on average.⁷ The survey is stratified by the six major regions of the country and the size of municipalities and includes quotas for age and gender to avoid multiple recalls.

Our outcomes reflect respondents’ beliefs and preferences regarding the trustworthiness of judicial institutions and human rights norms, respectively. The first set of outcomes we test are individuals’ preferences over the state’s use of force against citizens, captured by two separate measures.

One indicator relates to citizen preferences for social cleansing. The question in the survey reads:

If a group of people begin to carry out social cleansing, that is, kill people that some people consider undesirable, would you approve of them killing people considered undesirable, or would you not approve but understand, or would you neither approve nor understand?

⁵For a comprehensive review of similar designs, see Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno and Hernández (2020) and Balcells, Tellez and Villamil (2024) for a recent application.

⁶We provide suggestive evidence of compliance in the next section.

⁷Histogram of respondent density by day is shown in Figure B.1 in Appendix B.1.

The second indicator relates to respondents' normative beliefs regarding torture:

If the police torture a criminal to get information about a very dangerous organized crime group, would you approve of the police torturing the criminal, or would you not approve but understand, or would you neither approve nor understand?

These questions approximate how much respondents accept violent extra-judicial use of force against “undesirable” persons in society—a notion frequently employed by the military regime to justify its actions. While the social cleansing question may appear extreme, it closely mirrors the attitudes of regime officials toward political opponents. Scharpf (2018) argues that the prevailing view of nationalist officers was that “the enemy had ‘infected’ the society, which necessitated indiscriminate neutralization of any kind of person or institution conducive to subversion.” This ‘infection’ included “teachers, students, unionists, and everybody holding liberal, Marxist, or anti-Catholic values” (212). Each of these variables are measured on a scale of 1 to 3: 3 as neither approving or understanding, 2 as not approving but understanding, and 1 as approving.

Next, we measure citizen perceptions of procedural fairness in the justice system using a question that scores the degree to which respondents view trials as fair. The question reads:

“To what extent do you think the courts in (country) guarantee a fair trial? (Read: If you think the courts do not ensure justice at all, choose number 1; if you think the courts ensure justice a lot, choose number 7 or choose a point in between the two.)”

This measure directly captures respondent views on the impartiality of the judiciary. If citizens lower their perception of fairness, it may suggest the verdicts on polarizing issues, such as human rights violations, detract from the court's credibility as a neutral arbiter. On the other hand, a positive effect may suggest that citizens believe the courts are fulfilling their legal responsibility to prosecute this behavior.

Estimation

We estimate the following equation with least squares:

$$y_i = \alpha + \delta D_i + \sum_{k=1}^K \beta_k X_i^k + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where an individual is considered treated if they were surveyed after the verdict $D_i = \mathbb{1}[\text{Date of Survey} > \text{March, 26, 2012}]$. We code only those after the day of the verdict as treated since we do not know the exact time of day for every interview, meaning persons surveyed on the 26th may have responded prior to the news.⁸ Our outcomes of interest, y_i , are beliefs towards social cleansing, torture, and fair trials.

The core threat to identification is that there is a correlation between survey responses and time that is unrelated to the verdict. The primary means by which this may occur would be if types of respondents were different in the beginning versus the end of the survey: for instance, it is not uncommon for easy-to-reach populations, such as the elderly or unemployed, to be surveyed first (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno and Hernández, 2020); if this was the case, our estimates would be biased by the fact that younger working people likely differ in their baseline opinions from their counterparts.

We include K covariates X_i^k to adjust for differential selection into being surveyed at different times. First, LAPOP surveys are conducted in predefined strata, meaning an individual’s probability of falling into the treatment period is a function of their residence. To adjust our estimates accordingly, fixed effects for the six regions that compose the strata and municipality size in line with the survey’s sampling design. Further, the survey has quotas for age and gender, which was also adjust for. By doing so, we adjust for different probabilities of selection into treatment based on where and when the survey was administered.⁹

⁸Table B.2 in Appendix B.8 adjusts this assumption, either considering March 26 respondents as treated or missing, and shows consistent results.

⁹Table B.1 in Appendix B.2 includes a list of strata with exposed and control individuals, including the number of respondents per strata.

Next, we estimate the following dynamic specification.

$$y_{i(t)} = \sum_{t \neq -26:-22}^8 \tau_t + \sum_{k=1}^K \beta_k X_i^k + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

The outcomes are the same as before, but the parameters of interest are τ_t , which capture the difference in individual responses on day t relative to the baseline period, which we define as the first week of the survey (26 to 22 days before the trial verdict, or $t \in \{-26, -25, \dots -22\}$ in event time). If our identifying assumptions hold, we should find no difference between the base period and the times before the verdict on average. We turn to discussing those assumptions now.

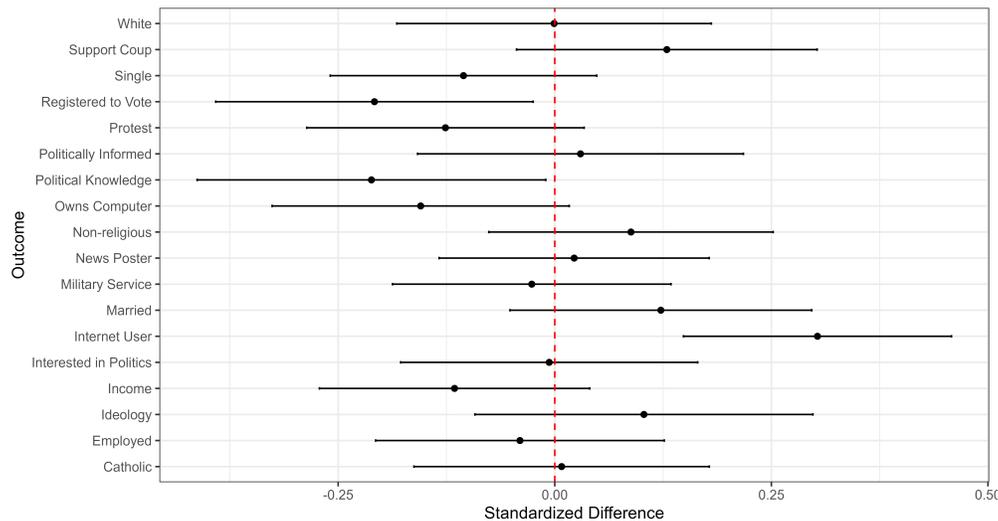
Identification Assumptions

Our key identifying assumption is that respondents are comparable before and after the trial verdict, meaning any difference in observed outcomes is a function of the treatment effect of the trial verdict. While this assumption cannot be proven, we test an observable implication: if respondents are similar before and after the survey, there should be no large observed differences between individuals pre- and post-survey along pre-defined characteristics like ideology, religion, race, income, employment, and political activity.

We plot partial correlation between treatment and the outcomes of interest net of covariates in Figure 2. We find little substantive difference between groups on fixed traits, such as income, employment, religion, race, political ideology, and marital status. We detect minor imbalances ($< .36 \sigma$) on three covariates: political knowledge, voter registration, and internet use. We note these differences are small, and are thus un concerning even if they are estimated with some statistical precision. We include these variables as covariates and find little difference from the baseline estimates.

One potential threat to inference may be that opinion sharply changes around an-

Figure 2: Balance Plot



Note: Point estimates obtained from equation 1. X-axis refers to the outcome of interest, 95% confidence intervals from robust standard errors.

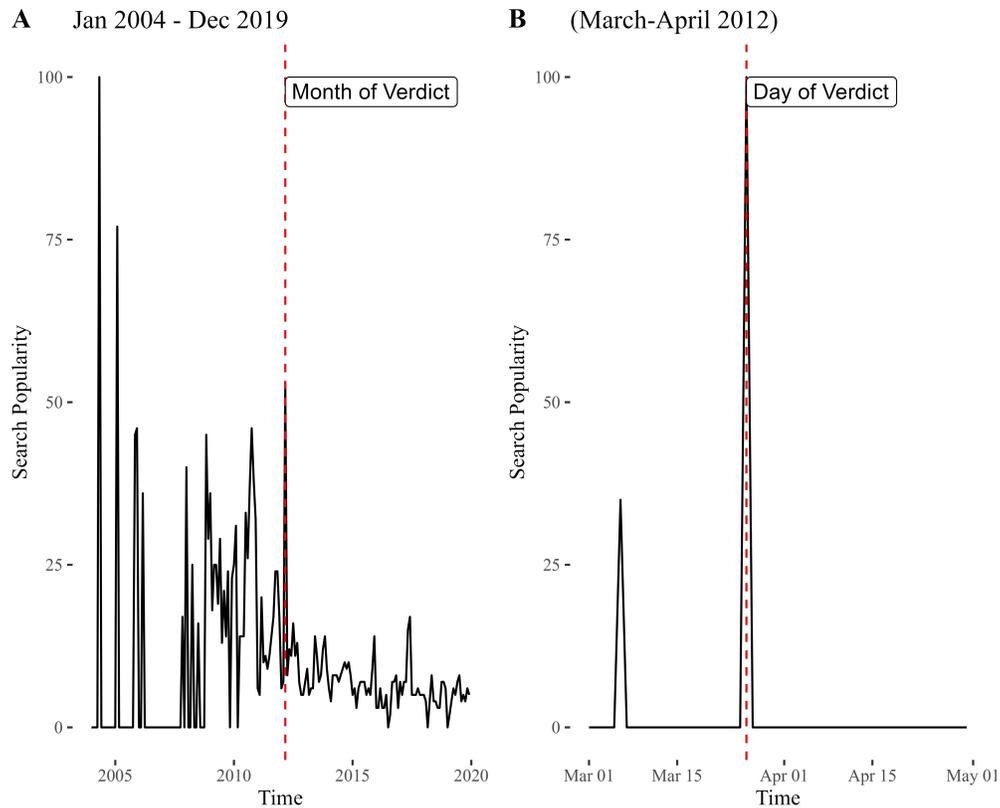
niversaries of key events which make human rights more salient in media discourse and social networks. In the Argentine context, the Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice (Remembrance Day) occurs annually on March 24, the anniversary of the 1976 coup that ushered in the last dictatorship. We test for this assumption using our dynamic specification by assessing preexisting opinion trends on days leading up to the trial verdict.

Our design hinges on a second critical assumption: to attribute a change in average responses to the verdict, we must assume respondents were aware of the verdict and influenced by the court’s decision. To support this assumption, we use data from Google Trends on the popularity of searches containing the name “Ramón Genaro Díaz Bessone” in Argentina.¹⁰ We collect monthly data from January 2004 until December 2019, which is scaled from 100 (the peak of search popularity in a relative time frame) to 0 (the lowest search popularity in a relative time frame) and daily data during the 2012 LAPOP survey wave in March and April. We plot trends in Figure 3. Panel A shows a spike in searches for “Ramón Genaro Díaz Bessone” in March 2012, the month the verdict was issued, but also suggests that Argentines were attuned to the trial, given the search popularity prior to this month. Panel B

¹⁰Google autofills this name when searching for the general.

shows this spike is driven by an increase in searches for the name on the day of the verdict, March 26, 2012. Appendix A.2.2 elaborates on public awareness: the Díaz Bessone verdict was among the 5% most-searched Argentine human rights trial verdicts from 2005-2017, and the most-read daily newspapers and wire service carried the story.

Figure 3: Public Awareness of Díaz Bessone



Note: Figure depicts frequency of Google searches for the specific search term “Ramón Genaro Díaz Bessone.” Panel A shows frequency of searches for all years that data is available (2004-December 2019), and Panel B shows search frequency for the months during the LAPOP 2012 survey (March 2012 - April 2012).

Since we cannot measure respondents’ consumption of information, our results are an Intention to Treat (ITT) effect, rather than a Complier Average Causal Effect (CACE). We note that ITT is strictly more conservative than CACE assuming compliance with the treatment, since CACE is the ITT divided by the share of compliers.

Table 1: Baseline Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A: Reject Social Cleansing				
Verdict	0.09** (0.03)	0.12** (0.04)	0.11* (0.05)	0.21** (0.07)
N. Respondents	1471	1457	1107	828
Panel B: Reject Torture				
Verdict	0.21*** (0.03)	0.19*** (0.04)	0.16** (0.05)	0.29*** (0.08)
N. Respondents	1469	1455	1108	827
Panel C: Fair Trial				
Verdict	-0.37** (0.14)	-0.41* (0.18)	-0.75*** (0.22)	-0.75* (0.33)
N. Respondents	1372	1359	1029	778
Model Statistics:				
Window	Full	Full	Two Weeks	One Week
Strata Fixed Effects?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Covariates?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.1$

Outcome questions from LAPOP. Verdict is a binary indicator scored one when the day of the survey is greater than March 26, 2012. Window refers to the absolute number of days away from the event we use as a sample. Covariates include Age, Gender, Weekend fixed effects, and a time trend. All models include strata fixed effects (region and size of municipality).

Effects on Preferences and Institutional Trust

Table 1 presents the baseline least squares results. Panels A, B and C report results when the outcome is torture, social cleansing, and fair trials respectively, with each successive column reporting more conservative tests. Column (1) of Panels A and B shows strong substantive and statistical evidence for that idea that verdicts influence human rights norms.

The guilty verdict against Díaz Bessone appears to increase respondents' anti-torture responses by 21% in comparison to the baseline. The most conservative estimate is a 16% difference between respondents before and after the verdict, which is a 29.5% change compared to the average in the pre-verdict group. Results are in a similar direction for torture, and are substantively larger. We note the baseline is much higher for social cleansing, so

the more conservative effect size could be due to ceiling effects. Nonetheless, we still find a 9% increase in the probability of holding the highest respect for human rights using this question, which is a 12% increase from the baseline.¹¹

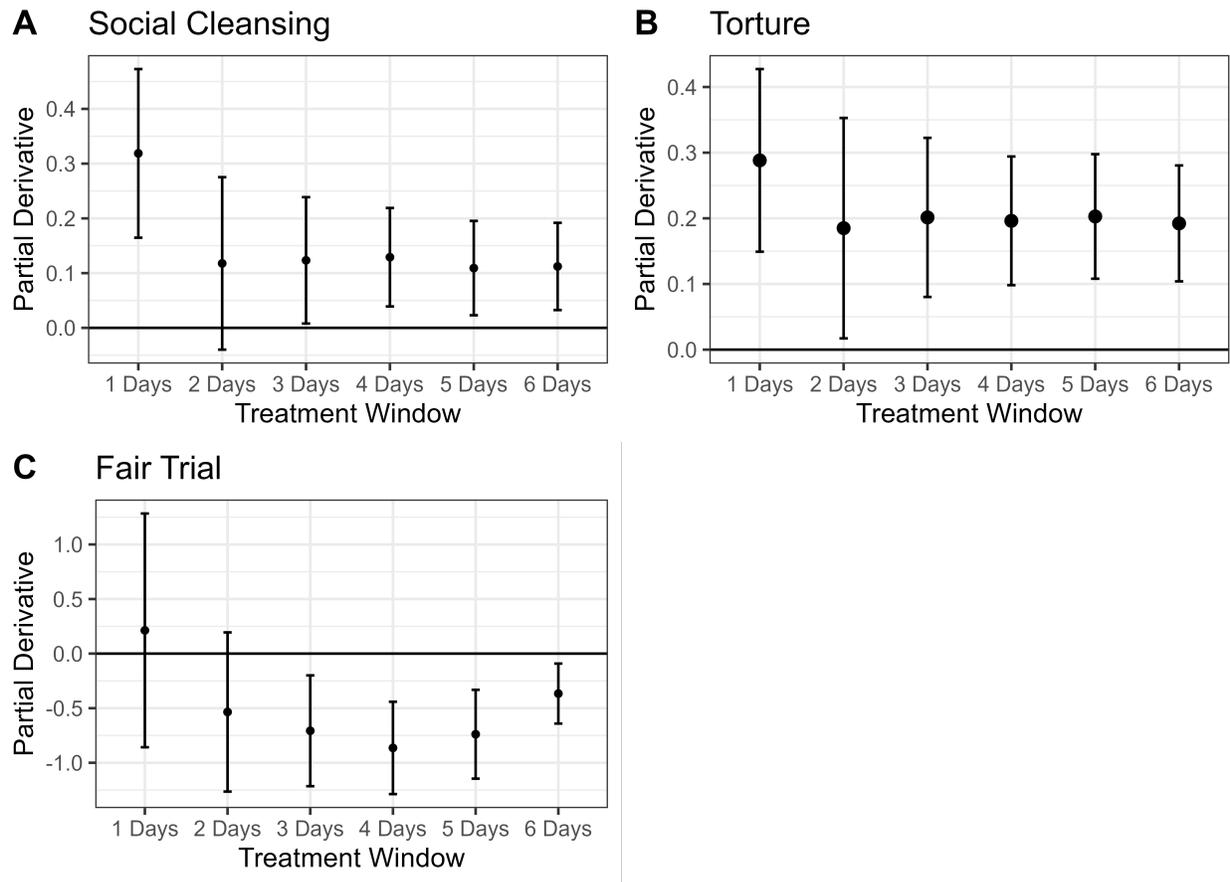
Panel C shows results for fair trials, which shows a reduction in the perception that trials are fair by nearly an entire point on the 7 point scale in the restricted sample.

Our baseline tests in Column (1) assume that treatment is exogenous to attitudes conditional on block fixed-effects. However, the treatment is a deterministic function of time, meaning any correlation between a generic trend and responses may be masked by our more austere estimates. We include a linear trend in Column (2) and find substantively and statistically similar results, as well as covariates adjusting for age and gender, which are quotas in the survey, and fixed effects for the weekend, since respondents may behave differently during the work week. In Columns (1) and (2) we use the entire span of survey responses. It may be the case, however, that respondents in the pre-period are only good counterfactuals for respondents in the post-period within a more restrictive window. We censor our data to two weeks and one week before and after the trial respectively, and re-estimate our baseline regression on the subset of the data. Our estimates, shown in Column (3) and (4), are slightly larger with this approach.

For robustness, we use alternative windows ranging from six to one days before or after the verdict and re-estimate our baseline specification with the treatment indicator and strata fixed-effects on the right hand side. Results are presented in Figure 4. Our results hold when restricting our tests to these different bandwidths, although the fair trial result attenuates at the one and two day window. The number of observations diminishes within more narrow bandwidths, causing some of the more restrictive tests to be conservative. Panels A and B show the effect size for social cleansing and torture is largely insensitive to the choice of bandwidth, although statistical uncertainty increases within the one day range.

¹¹Appendix B.7 presents histograms of each human rights outcome measure both pre- and post-verdict to visualize the substantive significance of the baseline results.

Figure 4: Alternative Windows



Note: Point estimates obtained from equation 1. X-axis refers to window (days before and after) treatment day for estimation. 95% confidence intervals from robust standard errors.

In Appendix B.4 panels A and B, we test for the possibility that our results are an artifact of generic response trends with two placebo tests. We regress our outcomes of interest on a linear trend and a dummy for the median time of the sample. Figure B.4 shows near zero and statistically insignificant effects for these two placebos, consistent with our design assumption that a break in response trends is due to the verdict. Further, in Appendix B.5, we show our results are not driven by changes in other forms of institutional and social trust.

Next, we show visual results from our dynamic specification in Equation (2). Each dot and shaded region represents the average difference of responding at time t relative to the first week of the survey. For instance, at time -5, the estimate is the difference between

respondents five days before the survey versus the first week of the survey. Figure 5 shows no discernible pre-trend in responses leading up to the trial verdict. This is promising for our key design assumption that the responses are not driven by temporal response cycles that are unrelated to the verdict. After the verdict, the average response jumps in line with our theoretical expectations.

Alternative Explanation: March 24 Day of Remembrance

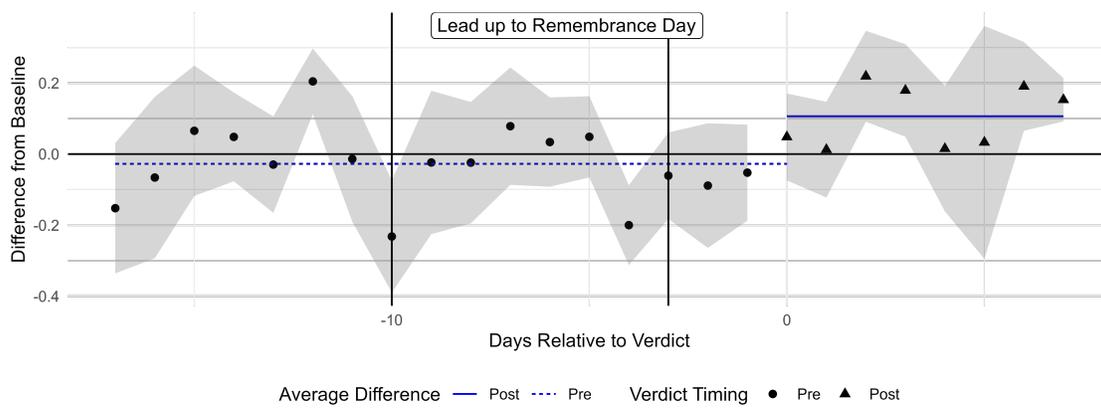
A potential complication for the results is that, rather than the verdict triggering respondents' shifts in attitudes toward human rights and the courts, another transitional justice-related event could have done so instead. March 24—two days before the Díaz Bessone verdict was handed down—is the anniversary of the 1976 coup that brought the military regime to power. Since the mid-1980s, the date has become a focal point for mobilization around the Argentine human rights community's demands for “memory, truth, and justice.” On March 24, 1996, adult children of disappeared persons led countrywide demonstrations. In 2001, the date became a holiday in Buenos Aires and later for the entire country (Robben, 2012). In Rosario, on March 24, 2012, more than 25,000 participated in a march led by the local chapter of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (APDH, 2012).

We note that if the Day of Remembrance broke the trend, we would have detected such a shift in Figure 5. The fact that the average response trend does not shift from the baseline until the day of the verdict is highly suggestive that the result is not driven by the day of remembrance.

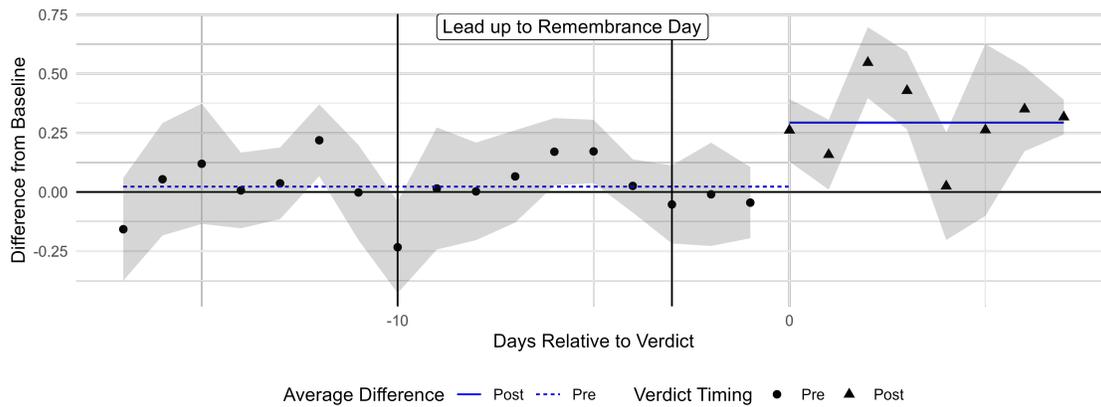
To address the possibility that the March 24 Day of Remembrance accounts for our results, we conduct a third placebo test. We regress the outcomes of interest on a dummy for March 24. Appendix B.4 panel C shows, as with the first two placebo tests, near zero and statistically insignificant effects. We do not find evidence that the Day of Remembrance induced a break in response trends. We also account for this possibility qualitatively

Figure 5: Dynamic Results

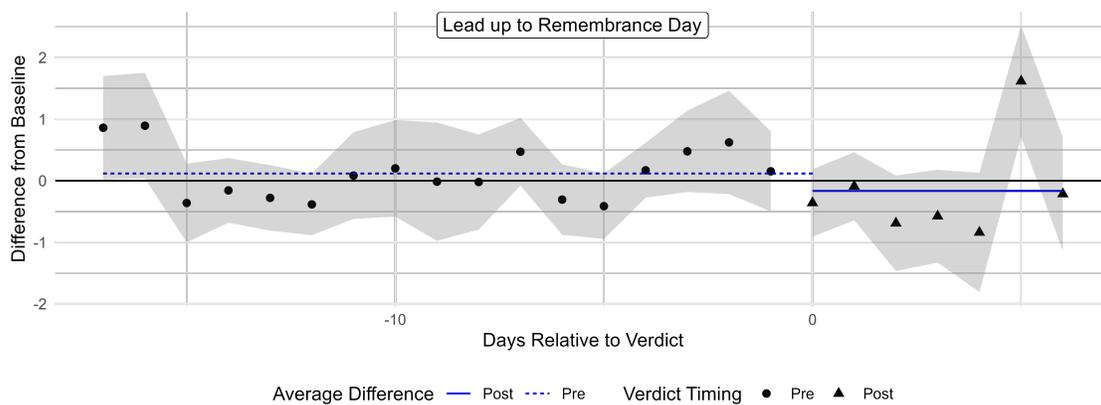
(a) Reject Social Cleansing



(b) Reject Torture



(c) Fair Trials



Note: Results from Equation (2). Shading is 95 % confidence intervals, horizontal lines show averages pre- and post-verdict respectively. Horizontal lines contain the region prior to the verdict in the week leading up to the announcement, including the Day of Remembrance.

by examining whether major commemorative events for the day of remembrance occurred on March 26, the day of the Díaz Bessone verdict, given that March 24 was a Saturday. Accounts of the commemorations indicate the primary national celebration in the heart of Buenos Aires, including in its attendance legislators, the Chief of the Cabinet of Ministers, organizations connected to the incumbent vice president, and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, occurred on March 24 itself (Ámbito, 2012).

Alternative Explanation: Social Desirability Bias

The immediacy of the survey to the verdict raises the possibility of social desirability bias. Given the publicity around the verdict, social pressure may have induced post-treatment respondents to voice insincere support for human rights and the courts to survey enumerators. Argentine politicians and social leaders associated support for the verdict with democracy and national pride. The governor of Rosario, Antonio Bonfatti, attended the sentencing and released a statement declaring the verdict showed Argentina's advancement in democratization, Argentines' progress in developing a "collective conscience", and the country's global leadership in human rights (La Nación, 2012). The Peronist Kirchner presidencies (2003-2015) regarded convicted defendants with a similar mixture of triumphalism and inevitability: observers compared the Kirchners' political backing for the convictions to "hunting lions in a zoo" (González-Ocantos, 2016b, 117). It is plausible that the resulting social climate could have led post-verdict respondents to falsify their human rights support.

Qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests our results are not a product of social desirability bias. Qualitatively, we first observe that the combination of results across our outcome measures weighs against social pressure. If the climate of triumphalism and inevitability after the verdict created social pressure, then we would expect respondents to become more supportive of both human rights and the courts. At the very least, respondents would not express more pessimistic attitudes about judicial fairness after the verdict. Yet our results suggest a robust negative change in these attitudes over this period. Second,

we observe that respondents' attitudes disfavoring human rights protections for the socially "undesirable" is a type of prejudice. A meta-analysis by Blair, Coppock and Moor (2020) finds that survey respondents are unlikely to conceal prejudices from survey enumerators.

We next consider direct evidence of whether individuals concealed negative attitudes toward human rights following the March 26 verdict. If social pressure suppressed respondents' willingness to publicly oppose transitional justice, then we might also expect to see the concealment of similar opposition by political elites. One of the most frequent criticisms of the Argentine trials by transitional justice opponents was that they were a Kirchnerist effort that disproportionately focused human rights policy on past actions and became a platform for demagoguery. Barros and Morales (2017) summarize this position:

[Critics say] the governments of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, and the sectors with which they were linked, distorted human rights, corrupting their place and their mission....overemphasizing the past to the detriment of the present and the future, and loading justice with the desire for revenge.

Immediately after the verdict, however, this position was still given voice. In Argentina's most prominent right-leaning newspaper, *La Nación*, an editorial appeared on April 1 denouncing the Cristina Fernández de Kirchner government for its attitude toward the 1976-1983 dictatorship. The editor accused the Kirchners of keeping alive the "residual" of the 1970s, of creating a teleology in which their political rivals bore incorrect ideologies that only paved the way for their administrations, and of exploiting the "heroic and inorganic culture" of post-dictatorship human rights activism for "political power" (Fernández Díaz, 2012). If elites in prominent newspapers were willing to publicly display an attitude that criticizes human rights policy—even after the verdict—then it's unlikely that responses in support of a higher human rights norm were driven by social pressure.

Quantitatively, we conduct several tests to evaluate the possibility of social desirability bias. First, we reproduce our results by filtering our analysis to respondents who are very

Table 2: Results Filtering to Earnest Types

	Cleansing (1)	Torture (2)	Trials (3)
1 Verdict	0.09* (0.04)	0.28*** (0.05)	-0.39† (0.20)
N. Respondents	650	657	610

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.1$

Note: Results showing respondents filtered down to only those who expressed support for a military coup in at least one potential contingency, under the assumption that people who felt comfortable expressing this controversial opinion would also feel comfortable expressing their true beliefs about torture, social cleansing, or trials.

unlikely to be subject to social pressure. We use a battery of questions in LAPOP about justifications for a military coup to partition respondents into two groups: those who express coups can be justified, a strongly antidemocratic and ostensibly socially undesirable opinion to hold in the wake of a trial of junta members, and those who express coups can never be justified. We assume the first group is very unlikely to falsify their responses to questions about torture or social cleansing: given that these preferences are socially undesirable for largely the same reasons, it would be strange for an individual to be outspoken about one while concealing the other. Forty-four percent of respondents in the sample express coups could be justified under at least one of five scenarios.

Table 2 shows respondents who are very unlikely to be reticent about responding to the survey (those who expressed support for military coups) still respond to the verdict in the same way as the average respondent. Since it would be strange for a respondent to censor their true beliefs for one set of questions and not the other, we interpret this as evidence that our findings are not driven by changes in social desirability after the verdict.

Second, if our results were driven by differences in respondent reactions to survey questions, we may expect differential attrition before and after the verdict. Assuming that lying is more costly for people than simply refusing to answer, there ought to be more missing survey responses after the verdict if people begin feeling social pressure to not express their

Table 3: Missingness/Non-Response to Main Outcome Questions

	Cleansing (1)	Torture (2)	Trials (3)
Verdict	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.02)
N. Respondents	1498	1498	1498

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.1$

Note: Results where the outcome of interest is missingness of each respective response. The values take on 1 for respondents who did not answer and zero otherwise. Note that the rate of nonresponse is essentially the same in the pre- and post-verdict period.

true belief. We first note nonresponse rates are very low—less than 3% for the human rights questions and less than 10% for the fair trial question. Next, we regress a binary indicator for refusal to answer on the verdict timing and covariates. Table 3 shows no difference in response rates between groups, suggesting social pressures do not meaningfully change in a way that would lead to mechanical differences in survey response.

Discussion: Explaining the Bundle of Findings

The Díaz Bessone verdict increased rejection of torture and social cleansing, but also decreased respondents' belief in the fairness of the Argentine judiciary. We briefly consider two plausible explanations for this bundle of effects: simultaneous individual-level effects and subgroup effects.

First, by the time of Díaz Bessone's verdict, respondents could have simultaneously increased their support for human rights norms and decreased their belief in the fairness of the judiciary. In this explanation, respondents find the verdict satisfactory and significant, but are unsettled by the process that led to this outcome. What about the process could have been divisive? Individuals may question the behavior of judicial actors, especially when they use creative and unusual legal strategies to overcome obstacles to prosecution and conviction (González-Ocantos, 2016*b*; Dancy et al., 2019).¹² By 2012, these legal debates, however, were

¹²Unconventional strategies were often used to overcome amnesties established by outgoing regimes. In

not in the foreground of reactions to the Argentine trials.

The central question, instead, was whether the trials should be a priority (Arnosó Martínez et al., 2015; Barros and Morales, 2017), especially given their association with the Kirchners' larger political program of "Memory, Truth, and Justice." This context suggests that individuals also may be reacting to the politicization of the trials which influences whether to prosecute, who to prosecute, and to what extent elected officials should intervene in proceedings (Elster, 1998; Osiel, 1995; Pion-Berlin, 1994). Malamud-Goti, one of the legal advisers to Alfonsín in setting up the Trial of the Juntas, cautioned that human rights trials would make transparent that rights and justice are the result of a process that is inherently political (Malamud-Goti, 1996). Because we leverage an ongoing survey at the time of the verdict, our research design does not allow us to distinguish reactions to the process separate from those to the verdict. Multiple survey waves over the course of a trial (González-Ocantos, 2016a) or a survey experiment would be able to sort out reactions to the process versus the verdict that may be driving our current results.

Second, subgroups of respondents in the sample could have reacted differently to the verdict. One subgroup, those who generally trust the courts but for whom human rights are not a salient political issue, could have been reminded of the importance of respecting human rights. This fits with the Smulovitz (2002) account of Argentine courts as presenting a judgment of the past dictatorship. Another subgroup, those who generally oppose transitional justice—perhaps perceiving it as a partisan project—could become more disposed to see the Argentine court system as captured by political interests after the verdict. It is also possible that for respondents who support transitional justice, the verdict was a reminder of misguided prosecutorial decisions, lowering their assessment of judicial fairness. In reaction to the verdict, Herminia Severin, a human rights activist, argued that the courts had not prosecuted according to the severity of perpetrators' alleged repression (La Nación, 2012).

the *Caravana de la Muerte* case, for example, Chilean Judge Juan Guzmán argued that because bodies of the disappeared were never found, the crime was not homicide, but prolonged kidnapping—a crime not covered by the 1978 Amnesty Law (Borzutzky, 2017).

Our research design is not well-suited to adjudicate among these plausible explanations. To estimate heterogeneity among subgroups, we would need to measure, for the entire sample, pre-verdict attitudes toward the courts and transitional justice. Having no information on the pre-verdict attitudes of those who answered the LAPOP survey after the verdict, we cannot assess the presence of these plausible mechanisms for different segments of the population. The survey's content limits our assessment of subgroup heterogeneity to respondent characteristics such as ideology that, while more stable after the verdict, are weak proxies for our attitudes of interest. Even with this proxy (a ten-point Left-Right ideology scale from LAPOP), a test of heterogeneous effects is under-powered given the sample size (see Appendix B.6). An experimental approach would allow for a stronger investigation of subgroup effects of a trial verdict on attitudes towards human rights and the judiciary.

Conclusion

Cross-national studies and qualitative accounts suggest that human rights trials can establish not only accountability for past repression, but also societal-wide beliefs in the importance of respecting rights. Trials, as the only form of transitional justice in which the judiciary plays a central role, also can shape attitudes towards this institution (González-Ocantos, 2016a). In this sense, trials are “forward-looking”: they influence public support for rights and courts under democracy (Nalepa, 2022). However, the diverging effects on these two outcomes suggest that trials create a trade-off in the determination of public attitudes that are perceived as critical for democratic consolidation. Augmenting beliefs in rights may come at the expense of perceptions of judicial fairness which, in turn, may undermine support for the courts. This trade-off is distinct from the justice versus peace/reconciliation dichotomy emphasized in the literature.

In studying the case of Argentina, we have attempted to find systematic, credible, micro-level evidence to estimate the effect of trial verdicts on attitudes toward rights and

the courts. Our observational analysis supports the idea that a judicial process that establishes guilt may induce public support for human rights norms. Because the announcement of the verdict is the central event in our study, we cannot separate the effect of the information revealed at trial from that of the official rendering of judgment on public attitudes. We suspect that information played a secondary role given the abundance of facts in the public domain about state violence prior to the Díaz Bessone trial - from Argentina's initial truth commission, CONADEP, several earlier trials, the educational curriculum, and public commemorations. Because Argentines are well-informed about the period, we believe that the verdict itself was critical in conveying the importance of these norms.

Limitations of our approach pave the way for future research, especially through the use of survey experiments. First, our event study does not allow for control over the nature and timing of the trial verdict, including directly confirming whether respondents took up the “treatment” of the verdict. An experimental approach would not only address compliance, but also could help distinguish a trial's import in transmitting information versus rendering judgment. Second, while our study points to important shifts in public views, we ultimately want to know if trials have an impact on long-term attitudes. Repeated surveying would allow us to determine whether trials facilitate norm diffusion, providing a more definitive response to concerns about social desirability bias. It may also gauge the depth of skepticism towards the courts.

Although we empirically focus on Argentina, the dynamics of the theory are not limited to this setting. The justice cascade literature implies that once countries make the decision to embark on domestic prosecutions, the ability of trials to contribute to norm diffusion is not limited in scope. If prior judicial weakness, in turn, contributes to the damaging effect of trials, then many new democracies unfortunately run this risk. If, however, the perceptions of judicial unfairness are driven by polarization in new democracies—over how the past regime should be perceived or addressed—then perhaps the trade-off between support for rights and

suspicion of the courts will be circumscribed. As it stands, states as diverse as Greece, South Korea, and Turkey have conducted trials under democracy after military rule, but Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay remain the locus of activity for post-authoritarian prosecutions. Time will tell how trials affect public attitudes in these states.

Supplementary Material: The supplementary material for this article can be found at [will add link to SI once it is published online]

Data Availability Statement: Replication material for this article can be found in Harvard Dataverse (Edwards, Gandhi and Grasse, 2024).

Acknowledgements: The authors thank John Ahlquist, Milena Ang, Geoff Dancy, Guillermo Toral, Rory Truex, three anonymous reviewers, and participants at the 2020 Emory Conference on Institutions and Lawmaking, the 2020 APSA Annual Meeting, and the 2020 Southern Workshop on Empirical Political Science for helpful comments and suggestions. Mina Derebail and Keaton Silver provided excellent research assistance.

Financial Support: None.

Competing Interests: None.

References

- Acuña, Carlos and Catalina Smulovitz. 1997. Guarding the Guardians in Argentina. In *Transitional Justice and the Rule of Law in New Democracies*, ed. A. James McAdams. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press pp. 93-122.
- Aguilar, Paloma, Laia Balcells and Héctor Cebolla-Boado. 2011. “Determinants of attitudes toward transitional justice: An empirical analysis of the Spanish case.” *Comparative Political Studies* 44(10):1397–1430.
- Ámbito. 2012. “La Plaza de Mayo, repleta a 36 años del golpe de Estado.” *Ámbito Financiero*.
URL: <https://www.ambito.com/politica/la-plaza-mayo-repleta-36-anos-del-golpe-estado-n3729968>
- APDH. 2012. “Más de 25 mil rosarinos se movilizaron al Monumento por el Día de la Memoria.”
URL: <https://www.apdh-argentina.org.ar/rosario/marcha-24-marzo-2012>

- Arnos Martínez, Maitane, Dario Paez Rovira, Manuel Cárdenas, Elena Mercedes Zubieta, Agustín Espinosa Pezzia and Marian Bilbao. 2015. “Representaciones sociales del pasado y rituales de justicia transicional en América Latina.” *Cadernos de Pesquisa* 45(156):48–70.
- Balcells, Laia, Juan Fernando Tellez and Francisco Villamil. 2024. “The Wars of Others: The Effect of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Spanish Nationalism.” *The Journal of Politics* 86(1):000–000.
- Balcells, Laia, Valeria Palanza and Elsa Voytas. 2022. “Do Museums Persuade Visitors? A Field Experiment on Transitional Justice.” *Journal of Politics* 84(1):496–510.
- Barros, Mercedes María and María Virginia Morales. 2017. “La lucha por los derechos humanos en la Argentina: redefiniciones, avances y desafíos en el nuevo milenio.” *A Contracorriente: Revista de Historia Social y Literatura en América Latina* 14(3):110–136.
- Blair, Graeme, Alexander Coppock and Margaret Moor. 2020. “When to worry about sensitivity bias: A social reference theory and evidence from 30 years of list experiments.” *American Political Science Review* 114(4):1297–1315.
- Borzutzky, Silvia. 2017. *Human Rights Policies in Chile: The Unfinished Struggle for Truth and Justice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boyd, Steven and Monika Nalepa. 2023. “Regime Survival: A Transitional Justice Perspective.” *Working paper prepared for the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting*.
- Cesarini, Paola. 2010. *Shaping democracy: The politics of transitional justice in Italy and Portugal*. PhD. Diss: Columbia University.
URL: <https://www.proquest.com/openview/7248caade3ef653e2444f686ae9ea106/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750diss=y>
- Crenzel, Emilio. 2008. *La historia política del Nunca Más*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores.
- Dancy, Geoff, Bridget E. Marchesi, Tricia D. Olsen, Leigh A. Payne, Andrew G. Reiter and Kathryn Sikkink. 2019. “Behind Bars and Bargains: New Findings on Transitional Justice in Emerging Democracies.” *International Studies Quarterly* 63(1):99–110.
- Dancy, Geoff and Eric Wiebelhaus-Brahm. 2015. “Timing, sequencing, and transitional justice impact: A qualitative comparative analysis of Latin America.” *Human Rights Review* 16:321–342.
- Dancy, Geoff and Verónica Michel. 2016. “Human rights enforcement from below: Private actors and prosecutorial momentum in Latin America and Europe.” *International Studies Quarterly* 60(1):173–188.
- Davis, Coreen. 2013. *State Terrorism and Post-Transitional Justice in Argentina*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Edwards, Pearce. 2023. “Religious Leaders and Resistance to Repression: The Bishops Opposed to Argentina’s Dirty War.” *Comparative Politics* Forthcoming.

- Edwards, Pearce, Jennifer Gandhi and Donald Grasse. 2024. "Replication Data for Fixing the Past: The Effects of Human Rights Trials on Political Attitudes in Argentina."
URL: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/L1SP40>
- El Ciudadano. 2012. "Díaz Bessone sigue en el juicio, que ya llega a su fin."
URL: <https://www.elciudadanoweb.com/diaz-bessone-sigue-en-el-juicio-que-ya-llega-a-su-fin/>
- El Litoral. 2010. "Empezó el juicio a Díaz Bessone."
URL: <https://www.ellitoral.com/index.php/diarios/2010/07/21/sucesos/SUCE-03.html>
- Elster, Jon. 1998. "Coming to terms with the past: A framework for the study of justice in the transition to democracy." *Archives europeennes de sociologie* 39(1):7–48.
- Encarnación, Omar. 2008. "Reconciliation after Democratization: Coping with the Past in Spain." *Political Science Quarterly* 3(123):435–459.
- Esparza, Gabrielle. 2022. "The Politics Of Human Rights Prosecutions: Civil Military Relations During The Alfonsín Presidency." *The Latin Americanist* 66(1):46–64.
- Feitlowitz, Marguerite. 2011. *A Lexicon of terror: Argentina and the legacies of torture*. Oxford University Press.
- Fernández Díaz, Jorge. 2012. "Neosetentismo, esa sutil forma de ser gorila." *La Nación*.
URL: <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/opinion/miradas/neosetentismo-esa-sutil-forma-de-ser-gorila-nid1461436/>
- Geddes, Barbara, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz. 2014. "Autocratic breakdown and regime transitions: A new data set." *Perspectives on Politics* 12(2):313–331.
- Gibson, James L, Gregory A Caldeira and Vanessa A Baird. 1998. "On the legitimacy of national high courts." *American Political Science Review* 92(2):343–358.
- González-Ocantos, Ezequiel. 2016a. "Evaluations of human rights trials and trust in judicial institutions: evidence from Fujimori's trial in Peru." *The International Journal of Human Rights* 20(4):445–470.
- González-Ocantos, Ezequiel. 2016b. *Shifting Legal Visions: Judicial Change and Human Rights Trials in Latin America*. Cambridge University Press.
- González-Ocantos, Ezequiel. 2020. *The Politics of Transitional Justice in Latin America: Power, Norms, and Capacity Building*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gonzalez-Ocantos, Ezequiel A, Paula Muñoz Chirinos, Nara Pavão and Viviana Baraybar Hidalgo. 2023. *Prosecutors, Voters and the Criminalization of Corruption in Latin America: The Case of Lava Jato*. Cambridge University Press.
- Helmke, Gretchen. 2005. *Courts under Constraints: Judges, Generals, and Presidents in Argentina, 1976-1983*. Cambridge University Press.
- Helmke, Gretchen and Frances Rosenbluth. 2009. "Regimes and the rule of law: Judicial independence in comparative perspective." *Annual Review of Political Science* 12:345–366.

- Huntington, Samuel. 1993. *The third wave: Democratization in the twentieth century*. University of Oklahoma Press.
- Kim, Hunjoon and Kathryn Sikkink. 2010. “Explaining the deterrence effect of human rights prosecutions for transitional countries.” *International Studies Quarterly* 54(4):939–963.
- Klor, Esteban F., Sebastian M. Saiegh and Shanker Satyanath. 2021. “Croynism in State Violence: Evidence from Labor Repression During Argentina’s Last Dictatorship.” *Journal of the European Economic Association* 19(3):1439–1487.
- La Nación. 2012. “Prisión perpetua a Díaz Bessone por la represión ilegal.”
URL: <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/prision-perpetua-a-diaz-bessone-por-la-represion-ilegal-nid1459907/>
- Layús, Rosario Figari. 2018. *The Reparative Effects of Human Rights Trials: Lessons from Argentina*. New York: Routledge.
- Lee, David S and Thomas Lemieux. 2010. “Regression discontinuity designs in economics.” *Journal of Economic Literature* 48(2):281–355.
- Lessa, Francesca. 2013. *Against Impunity: Memory and Transitional Justice in Argentina and Uruguay*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Linzer, Drew A and Jeffrey K Staton. 2015. “A global measure of judicial independence, 1948–2012.” *Journal of Law and Courts* 3(2):223–256.
- Lupu, Noam and Leonid Peisakhin. 2017. “The Legacy of Political Violence across Generations.” *American Journal of Political Science* 61(4):836–851.
- Magalhães, Pedro C, Jon K Skiple, Miguel M Pereira, Sveinung Arnesen and Henrik L Bentsen. 2023. “Beyond the Myth of Legality? Framing Effects and Public Reactions to High Court Decisions in Europe.” *Comparative Political Studies* Forthcoming.
- Malamud-Goti, Jaime. 1996. *Game Without End: State Terror and the Politics of Justice*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Mignone, Emilio Fermin, Cynthia L Estlund and Samuel Issacharoff. 1984. “Dictatorship on Trial: Prosecution of Human Rights Violations in Argentina.” *Yale Journal of International Law* 10:118.
- Muñoz, Jordi, Albert Falcó-Gimeno and Enrique Hernández. 2020. “Unexpected Event during Survey Design: Promise and Pitfalls for Causal Inference.” *Political Analysis* 28(2):186–206.
- Munck, Gerardo. 1998. *Authoritarianism and democratization: Soldiers and workers in Argentina, 1976-1983*. Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Nalepa, Monika. 2010. “Captured Commitments: An Analytic Narrative of Transitions with Transitional Justice.” *World Politics* 62(2):341–380.
- Nalepa, Monika. 2012. “Tolerating mistakes: How do popular perceptions of procedural

- fairness affect demand for transitional justice?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56(3):490–515.
- Nalepa, Monika. 2022. *After Authoritarianism: Transitional Justice and Democratic Stability*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nino, Carlos S. 1991. "The Duty to Punish Past Abuses of Human Rights Put into Context: The Case of Argentina." *The Yale Law Journal* 100(8):2619–2640.
- O'Donnell, Margarita K. 2009. "New Dirty War Judgments in Argentina: National Courts and Domestic Prosecutions of International Human Rights Violations." *NYU Law Review* 84:333–374.
- Olsen, Tricia D, Leigh A Payne and Andrew G Reiter. 2010. "Transitional Justice in the World, 1970-2007: Insights from a New Dataset." *Journal of Peace Research* 47(6):803–809.
- Osiel, Mark. 1995. "Dialogue with dictators: Judicial resistance in Argentina and Brazil." *Law and Social Inquiry* 20(2):481–560.
- Osorio, Javier, Livia I. Schubiger and Michael Weintraub. 2018. "Disappearing dissent? Repression and state consolidation in Mexico." *Journal of Peace Research* 55(2):252–266.
- Pereira, Anthony. 2005. *Political (in) justice: authoritarianism and the rule of law in Brazil, Chile, and Argentina*. University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Pion-Berlin, David. 1994. "To Prosecute or to Pardon: Human Rights Decisions in the Latin American Southern Cone." *Human Rights Quarterly* 105:105–130.
- Poertner, Mathias and Nan Zhang. 2023. "The effects of combating corruption on institutional trust and political engagement: evidence from Latin America." *Political Science Research and Methods* Forthcoming:1–10.
- Risse, Thomas, Stephen C Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink. 1999. *The power of human rights: International norms and domestic change*. Vol. 66 Cambridge University Press.
- Robben, Antonius CGM. 2012. "From dirty war to genocide: Argentina's resistance to national reconciliation." *Memory Studies* 5(3):305–315.
- Romero, Luis Alberto and James P. Brennan. 2013. *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*. University Park: Penn State University Press.
- Rozenas, Arturas, Sebastian Schutte and Yuri Zhukov. 2017. "The Political Legacy of Violence: The Long-Term Impact of Stalin's Repression in Ukraine." *The Journal of Politics* 79(4):1147–1161.
- Rozenas, Arturas and Yuri M. Zhukov. 2019. "Mass Repression and Political Loyalty: Evidence from Stalin's Terror by Hunger." *American Political Science Review* 113(2):569–583.
- Scharpf, Adam. 2018. "Ideology and state terror: How officer beliefs shaped repression during Argentina's 'Dirty War'." *Journal of Peace Research* 55(2):206–221.

- Scharpf, Adam and Christian Gläsel. 2020. "Why Underachievers Dominate Secret Police Organizations: Evidence from Autocratic Argentina." *American Journal of Political Science* 64(4):791–806.
- Sikkink, Kathryn. 2011. *The Justice Cascade*. W.W. Norton.
- Sikkink, Kathryn and Carrie Booth Walling. 2007. "The Impact of Human Rights Trials in Latin America." *Journal of Peace Research* 44(4):427–455.
- Skaar, Elin. 2011. *Judicial Independence and Human Rights in Latin America*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Smulovitz, Catalina. 2002. "The discovery of law: political consequences in the Argentine case." *Global prescriptions: the production, exportation, and importation of a new legal orthodoxy* pp. 249–75.
- Speck, Paula K. 1987. "The trial of the Argentine Junta: Responsibilities and realities." *The University of Miami Inter-American Law Review* pp. 491–534.
- Vezzetti, Hugo. 2007. "Conflictos de la memoria en la Argentina. Un estudio histórico de la memoria social." *Historizar el pasado vivo en América Latina* pp. 3–44.
- Zunino, Marcos. 2019. "Judicial vetting: the forgotten aspect of Argentina's transition." **URL:** <http://opiniojuris.org/2019/02/18/judicial-vetting-the-forgotten-aspect-of-argentinas-transition/>

Online Appendix

Contents

A	Scope and Case Description	2
A.1	Scope Conditions	2
A.2	Profile of the Díaz Bessone Trial and Verdict	3
A.2.1	The Representativeness of the Trial	3
A.2.2	National Attention to the Verdict	4
B	Observational Design	5
B.1	Density of Respondents	5
B.2	Breakdown of Strata	7
B.3	Balance Test Covariates	7
B.4	Placebo Tests	8
B.5	Falsification Tests	9
B.6	Heterogeneous Effects	10
B.7	Attitude Distributions	12
B.8	Recoding March 26 Respondents	12

A Scope and Case Description

A.1 Scope Conditions

Table A.1: Scope Conditions

Country Name	End Year of Dictatorship	Years Until Prosecution
Argentina	1971	2
Bolivia	1976	21
Brazil	1985	3
Benin	1969	21
Chile	1989	1
Dominican Rep	1965	15
Ecuador	1975	4
Ethiopia	1991	4
Guatemala	1985	6
Haiti	1991	4
Korea South	1987	8
Lesotho	1993	0
Madagascar	1975	18
Panama	1984	5
Peru	1970	9
Niger	1991	0
Sierra Leone	1990	8
Sudan	1967	18
Uruguay	1984	1

Note: Dictatorship data from Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2014) measures the end of military regimes, and Olsen, Payne and Reiter (2010) measures the first year of prosecutions. Mean is 8 years and median is 5.

A.2 Profile of the Díaz Bessone Trial and Verdict

In this section, we expand on the nature of the “treatment” LAPOP survey respondents received in our observational data by placing the Díaz Bessone case in context with other human rights trials in the 2005-2016 period. We show that (1) the trial was representative of other trials in terms of verdict, sentencing, and number of defendants, and (2) the trial was different from most other trials in that it attracted national attention and interest because of Díaz Bessone’s rank of general and status as ex-cabinet member.

From the combination of these two characteristics, we assert that (1) our findings from this trial likely generalize given the trial’s similarity to others on all dimensions except the rank of the defendant, and (2) because of the comparatively less attention given to most other trials, we expect researchers would detect the changes in attitudes toward human rights and fair trials only among those who could have taken up the “treatment.”

There could be a concern that Díaz Bessone’s high rank alone accounts for the results. Respondents could find the conviction of a higher-level official more justified than the conviction of a lower-level official, increasing opposition toward the behaviors described in the verdict. Respondents could also see the conviction of a high-ranking official as greater evidence of a politicized court carrying out a “witch hunt” against officials of a former regime, thereby decreasing belief in courts’ ability to provide a fair trial. If this were the case, the findings would not generalize to trials whose defendants had lower rank.

However, the predictions in the theory—support for human rights norms increasing among those who find the courts to be fair and belief in courts’ fairness decreasing among those with less support for human rights norms—do not depend on the rank of the defendant. Rather, they depend only on the prior belief of respondents about the courts and human rights norms. The necessary and sufficient condition to activate these prior beliefs is therefore simply *a guilty verdict in a human rights trial*.

A.2.1 The Representativeness of the Trial

In Table A.2, we compare the Díaz Bessone trial with population averages of the 183 Argentine human rights trials from 2005 to 2017.

Attribute	Díaz Bessone	All Trials Avg.
Number of Defendants	6	6.7
Guilty Verdict Rate	83.3%	79.8%
Life Sentences (<i>among guilty</i>)	40%	39.7%
Non-Life Sentence Avg. Length	15.7 years	14.2 years
Number of Victims Named	91	31.7

Table A.2: Comparing the Díaz Bessone Trial with All Trials

A.2.2 National Attention to the Verdict

Using Google Trends data, the following procedure was used to determine the level of interest in each trial verdict:

- General search criteria: Argentina, 2006-2020.
- For each trial:
 - Fetch trend for name of highest-ranking defendant(s) in trial.
 - Record relative search frequency in month of trial verdict as a percentage of relative search frequency for first defendant convicted in human rights trials, Miguel Etchecolatz, in the month of his verdict.
 - If there are too few searches for the defendant to register in Google Trends, code as zero.

We report the results in Figure A.1, in which the dashed vertical line highlights the search interest in the Díaz Bessone verdict. The search interest for this verdict is two standard deviations above the mean of all verdicts, implying this was a significant trial. However, it was not a “blockbuster” like the most-searched trial: the 2011 ESMA Mega-Cause trial verdict in which notorious torturer Alfredo Astiz received a life sentence.

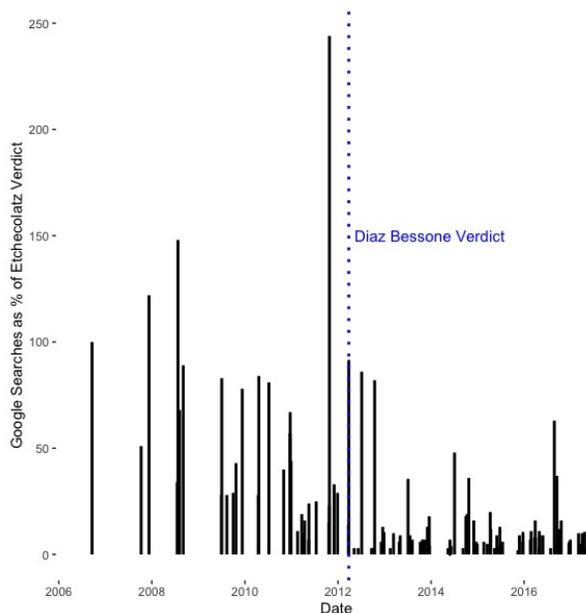


Figure A.1: Google Search Frequency for Trial Verdicts, 2006-2017

Note: Vertical lines represent Google search frequency—coded according to procedure listed above—for each trial between 2006 and June 2017. Vertical dashed blue line indicates location of Díaz Bessone verdict search frequency.

While we demonstrate on the “demand” side that the Díaz Bessone verdict was among the top 5% most-searched Argentine human rights trial verdicts, we want to go further in demonstrating the “supply” side of news about the verdict. Table A.3 below lists the outlets

that covered the verdict, and their circulation in the year 2012 if data were available from the Instituto Verificador de Circulaciones (IVC). Of the six outlets for which articles were recoverable with URLs, we note that this encompasses three of the four largest outlets by circulation (Clarín, La Nación, and Página 12) in Argentina, and the second largest outlet by circulation in the province of Santa Fe, where the verdict was handed down (El Litoral). This list also does not include all outlets that incorporated the verdict news from the EFE wire service, the largest Spanish-language wire service in the world. The coverage of the story suggests that Argentines searching for Bessone after the verdict were likely to come across news stories about the event, and that readers of these sources were likely to encounter the information.

Source	Link to Article	Circulation (IVC)
Clarín	Click here	290,243 (2012)
La Nación	Click here	169,896 (2012)
Página 12	Click here	≈ 50,000
Rosario3	Click here	<i>Unknown</i>
11Noticias	Click here	<i>Unknown</i>
El Litoral	Click here	15,724 (2012)

Table A.3: Selected Newspapers Publishing the Díaz Bessone Verdict (Print/Online)

B Observational Design

B.1 Density of Respondents

Figure B.1 shows a histogram of respondents by day in the 2012 LAPOP wave in Argentina. The Figure shows the density of survey participants does not change around the day of the survey, which suggests that patterns of responses are uncorrelated with the trial verdict. Figure B.2 displays this information with a LOESS fit of density over time.

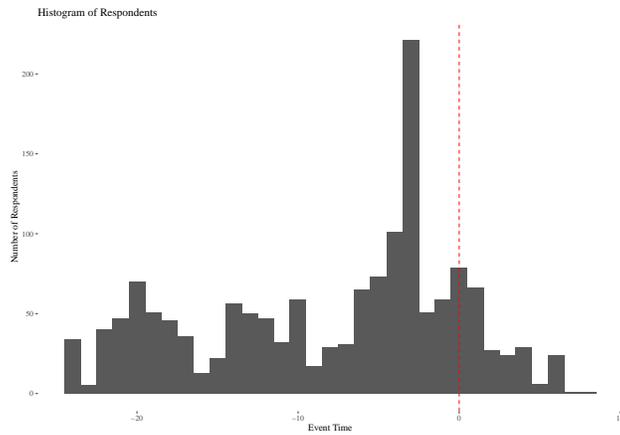


Figure B.1: Respondent Density
Note: Histogram of respondents by day during the LAPOP survey in Argentina in 2012. Vertical red dashed line marks day of treatment.

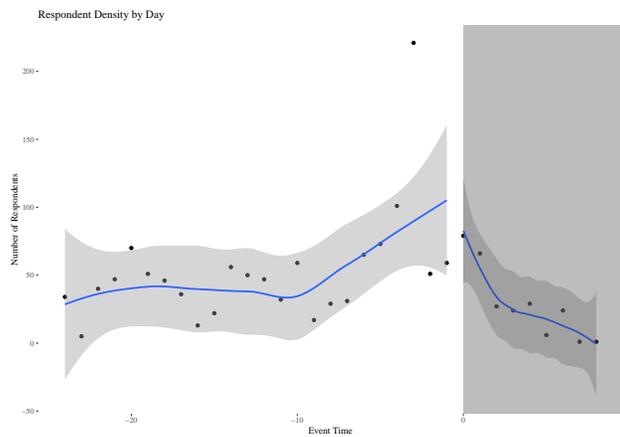


Figure B.2: Respondent Density
Note: Time series of number of respondents. Blue lines with shading are loess fit with 95% confidence intervals.

B.2 Breakdown of Strata

Table B.1: Strata Breakdown

Urbano/Rural	Region	Size (1-5)	Total Respondents	Total Treat	Prop. Treated
Urbano	AMBA	1	450	22	0.05
Urbano	Centro	1	108	38	0.35
Urbano	Centro	2	18	18	1.00
Urbano	Centro	3	36	18	0.50
Urbano	Centro	4	54	18	0.33
Urbano	Noreste Argentino (NEA)	2	54	2	0.04
Urbano	Noreste Argentino (NEA)	3	18	0	0.00
Urbano	Noreste Argentino (NEA)	4	36	18	0.50
Urbano	Noroeste Argentino (NOA)	2	108	41	0.38
Urbano	Noroeste Argentino (NOA)	3	18	16	0.89
Urbano	Noroeste Argentino (NOA)	4	36	0	0.00
Urbano	Cuyo	2	54	0	0.00
Urbano	Cuyo	3	18	12	0.67
Urbano	Cuyo	4	18	0	0.00
Urbano	Patagonia	2	18	3	0.17
Urbano	Patagonia	3	36	2	0.06
Urbano	Patagonia	4	18	0	0.00
Urbano	Provincia de Buenos Aires	2	126	1	0.01
Urbano	Provincia de Buenos Aires	3	36	18	0.50
Urbano	Provincia de Buenos Aires	4	72	18	0.25
Rural	Centro	5	18	12	0.67
Rural	Noreste Argentino (NEA)	5	36	0	0.00
Rural	Noroeste Argentino (NOA)	5	36	0	0.00
Rural	Cuyo	5	18	0	0
Rural	Provincia de Buenos Aires	5	72	0	0

Note: Breakdown of strata, total respondents, total surveyed after verdict, and proportion of treated per strata.

B.3 Balance Test Covariates

Our core identifying assumption is that the timing of the trial verdict was uncorrelated generic response trends, meaning individuals surveyed after were similar to ones surveyed before. While we cannot know for certain that respondents were similar in their unobservable traits, we test for similarity of respondents along observed attributes.

We check for balance along four dimension, displayed in Figure 2 in the main text: attrition in response to our outcomes of interest (Panel A), demographic characteristics of respondents (Panels B and C), media consumption, including internet use, interest in politics, posting of news on social media, and watching the news (Panel D) formal political activity (being register for a party and to vote, voting for President, attending town halls and city council meetings, Panel E), and informal political activity (protest, signing petitions, contacting politicians, solving local community problems, Panel F).

Each category represents its own threat to inference: if individual response rates change after treatment (attrition), it would suggest that different types are choosing to fill out the survey, which may generate an upward bias if something like the “Bradley Effect” leads individuals who have high trust and high preference for social cleansing or torture to censor by not filling out the survey. We find no evidence of differences in attrition for our outcomes across treatment and control groups. We assume from this result that missingness occurs at random conditional on covariates. In Figure B.3 we impute the block mean for missing

outcome data and re-estimate our main specification with an indicator for missingness and find similar results to those in Table 1.

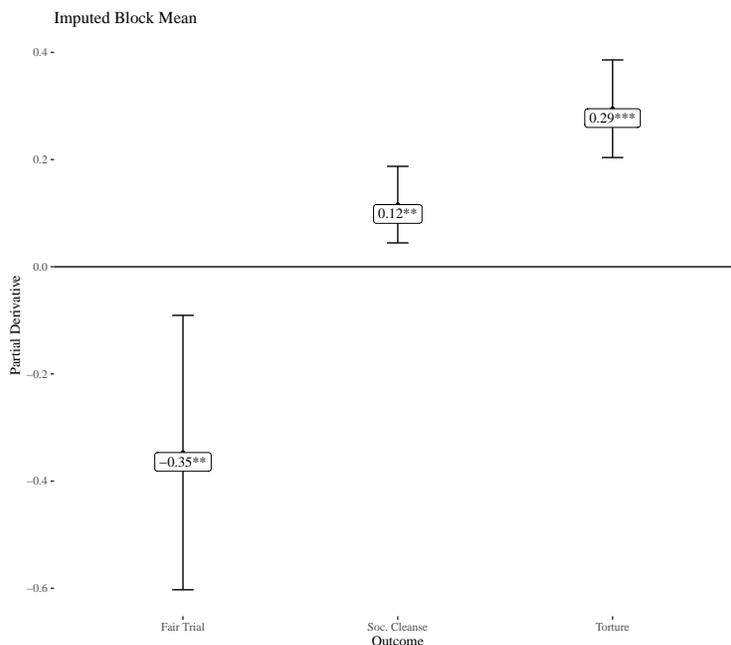


Figure B.3: Imputing Missing Outcome Data

Note: Strata mean imputed for missing outcomes under Missing at Random assumption. Regressions include strata fixed effect and dummy for imputation.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

If individuals are very different demographically, it would suggest a violation of our assumption that after conditioning on strata fixed effects the treatment was as-if randomly assigned. Having many respondents that are older with different incomes or particular races and genders would provide clear evidence of imbalance on observable, which implies imbalance on unobservable traits as well.

Next, we check balance on media consumption - if everyone in the treated group was an avid internet user who consumed more news media, they may be more likely to comply with the treatment, but they also may be generally more informed about the dictatorship in ways that make them distrustful of institutions are beholden to strong human rights norms. Finally, we check balance on political participation - both formally and informally - since politically active persons who are more civically engaged may hold stronger views correlated with our outcomes of interest. For example, if we found imbalance on protest activity, it may suggest more liberal activists are in the treated group, generating upward bias.

B.4 Placebo Tests

We conduct three placebo exercises to test for the possibility that our results are an artifact of underlying endogenous trends in survey response. We subset the data to before the treatment period, and exclude the day of the verdict itself, to detect trends that may violate

excludability. We censor our data in this way to avoid coding treated individuals with placebo treatment indicators.

First, we construct a placebo treatment using the empirical median of the pre-treatment trends (Lee and Lemieux, 2010; Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno and Hernández, 2020). Second, we regress our outcomes on a linear trend (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno and Hernández, 2020). Third, we construct a placebo treatment day of the anniversary of the coup, which could have triggered memories of the dictatorship from respondents. Results are displayed in Figure B.4. We fail to reject the null of a placebo treatment effect for all three tests on all outcomes. While the non-detection of a violation cannot prove our untestable assumption that treatment was randomly timed, the small and insignificant estimates are in line with the exclusion restriction.

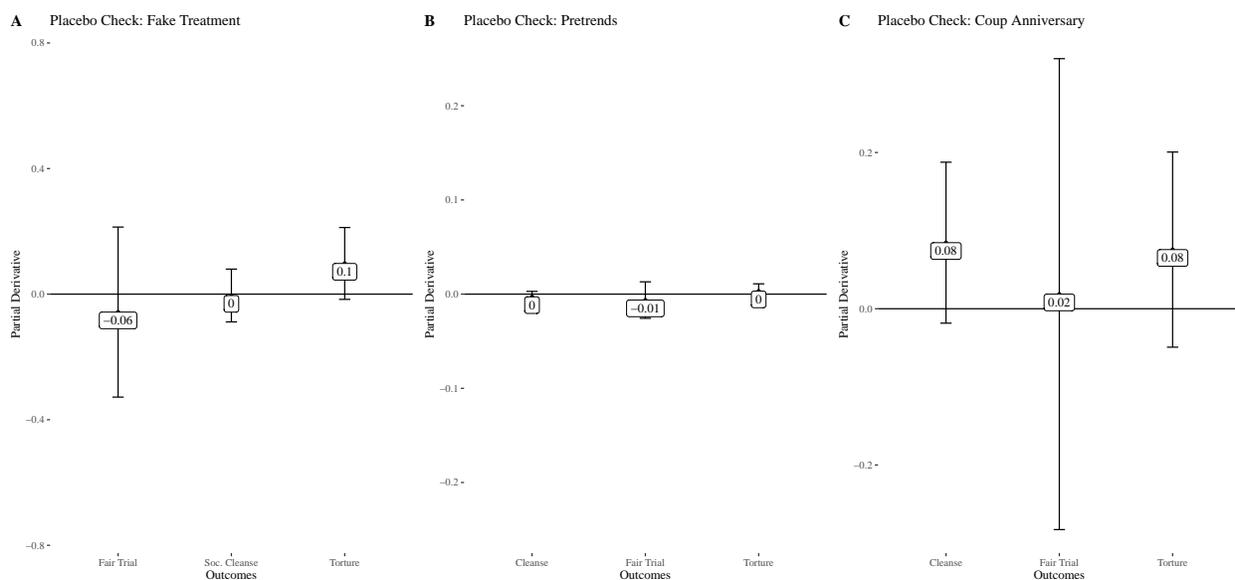


Figure B.4: Placebo Treatments

Note: Point estimates obtained from equation 1. 95% confidence intervals from robust standard errors.

B.5 Falsification Tests

Cascading events or idiosyncratic shocks to broader social and institutional trust could explain our results. For example, if trust in the police or the high courts was significantly different in the pre and post period, our results could be an artifact of unobserved policy shocks or news cycles which moved public opinion towards human rights norms and away from the perception that courts guarantee fair trials. To test this possibility, we include measures of trust which ought to be unrelated from the courts verdict on Bessone: trust in the Supreme Court (which was not involved in the trial), trust in local government, the legislature, the president, the police, and general social trust. We plot results in Figure B.5, which shows a near zero and statistically insignificant effect of the verdict on these measures of trust.

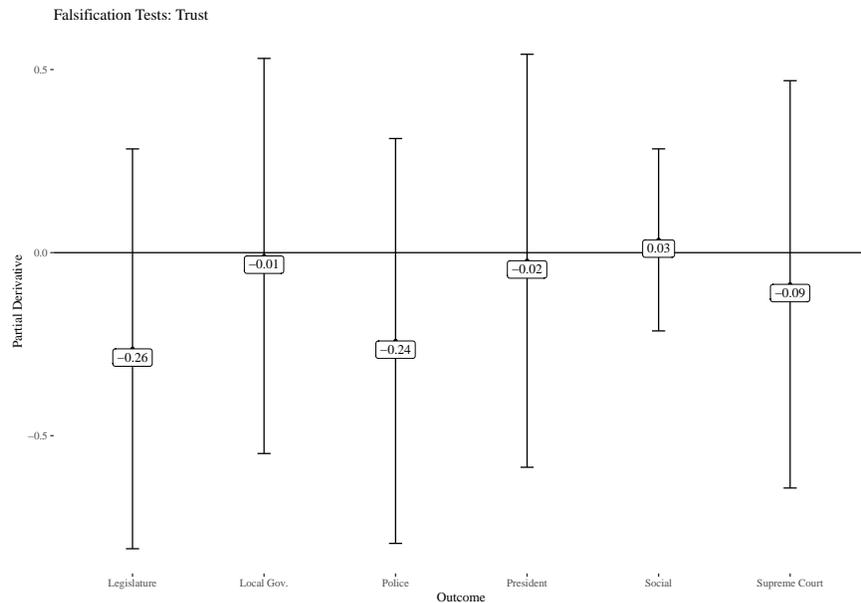


Figure B.5: Falsification Test: Institutional and Social Trust

Note: Point estimates obtained from equation 1. X-axis refers to outcome. Estimates are within one week window and include treatment, trend, and interaction of treatment and trend. 95% confidence intervals from robust standard errors. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

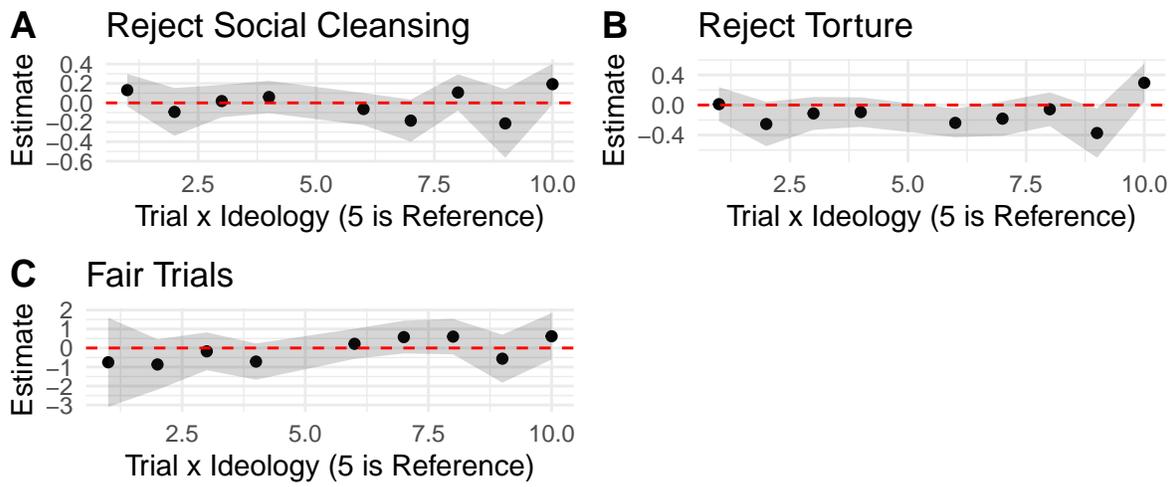
B.6 Heterogeneous Effects

We study the potential for heterogeneous effects by interacting the treatment variable with categories for respondent ideology. LAPOP asks respondents to rank their ideology from 1-10, where 1 is the furthest to the left and 10 is furthest to the right. We create dummies for each ideology category, and estimate the following model.

$$y_i = \alpha + \delta D_i + \gamma_j \left(D_i \times \sum_{j \neq 5}^j \text{Ideology}_i^j \right) + \lambda_j \sum_{j \neq 5}^j \text{Ideology}_i^j + \sum_{k=1}^K \beta_k X_i^k + \varepsilon_i \quad (3)$$

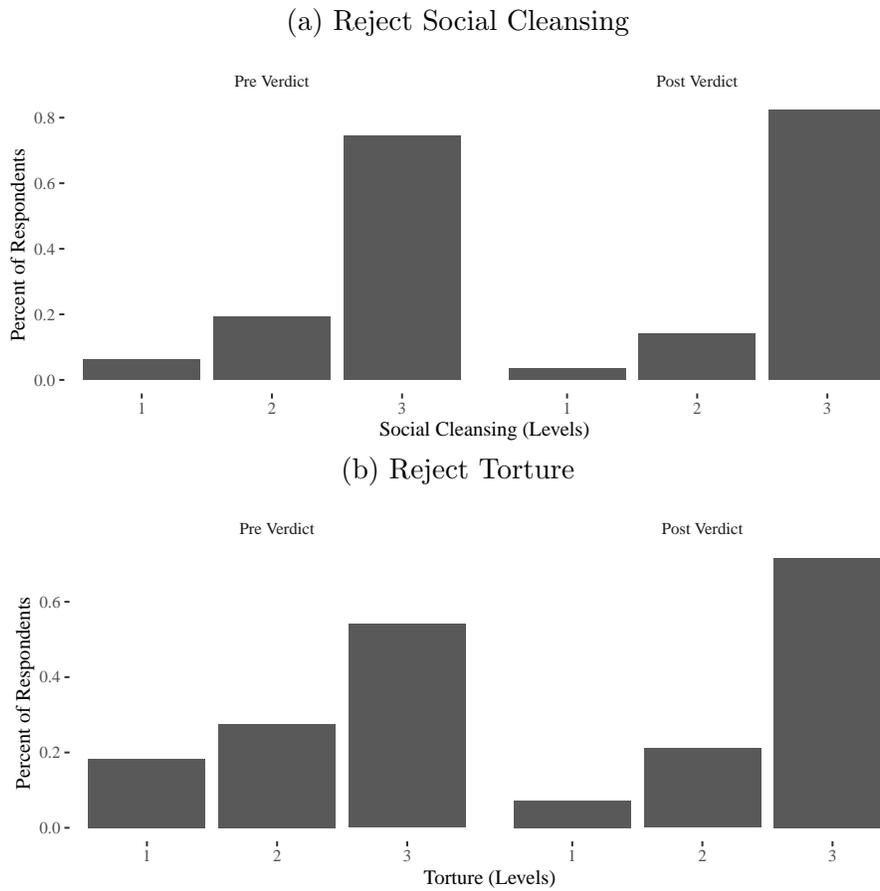
We use 5 - the middle of the distribution - as the reference, and plot the coefficients and 95% confidence intervals for j ideology scores $\{1, 2, 3, 4\} \cup \{6, 7, 8, 9, 10\}$. We plot the coefficient estimates which show the the results are homogeneous across the ideological spectrum. We find no evidence of differential effects across ideological categories, however, we stress that the absence of heterogeneity in this sample cannot be extrapolated to mean that ideology is never a moderating factor, since in practice we may not have power across treatment arms to detect heterogenous effects.

Figure B.6: Heterogeneous Effects by Ideology



B.7 Attitude Distributions

Figure B.7: Distribution of Human Rights Attitudes Pre and Post Verdict



Note: Histogram of responses by category before and after verdict for Social Cleansing and Torture questions.

B.8 Recoding March 26 Respondents

	Reject Social Cleansing		Reject Torture		Fair Trial							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Verdict	0.06*	0.08*	0.09**	0.12**	0.14***	0.09*	0.19***	0.15***	-0.27*	-0.26	-0.36*	-0.37*
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.13)	(0.17)	(0.14)	(0.18)
N. Respondents	1471	1457	1414	1402	1469	1455	1411	1399	1372	1359	1328	1317
Model Statistics:												
March 26 Recode?	Treated	Treated	Missing	Missing	Treated	Treated	Missing	Missing	Treated	Treated	Missing	Missing
Strata Fixed Effects?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Covariates?	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

***, $p < 0.001$; **, $p < 0.01$; *, $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.1$

Table B.2: Baseline Results Recoding March 26

Outcome questions from LAPOP. Verdict in columns (1), (2), (5), (6), (9), and (10) is a binary indicator scored one when the day of the survey is greater than or equal to March 26, 2012. In columns (3), (4), (7), (8), (11), and (12), verdict is a binary indicator scored one when the day of the survey is greater than March 26, 2012, and is coded as missing for survey day March 26. Covariates include Age, Gender, Weekend fixed effects, and a time trend. All models include strata fixed effects (region and size of municipality).