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## Norms



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Norms are behavioral rules sustained by shared expectations about appropriate conduct, distinct from personal preferences, habits, or conventions. They include descriptive beliefs about what people do and injunctive beliefs about what people think one ought to do. Following Bicchieri and Dimant (2022) and Helmke and Rath (2025), compliance with norms is conditional: Actors conform when they expect others both to comply and to approve compliance, so misperceptions can undermine enforcement.

Recent scholarship, such as Suhay (2014), Zeng et al. (2017), and Towns and Rumelili (2017), has studied norms not only as behavioral rules, but also as cultural expectations, institutionalized standards, and tools of governance. This conceptual flexibility makes norms powerful, yet also prone to being confused with related ideas, such as values, culture, identity, and institutions (Helmke & Rath, 2025; Hagström & Gustafsson, 2015).

The concept is a debated one. Scholars like Suhay (2014) and Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2019) emphasize norms as relatively stable and

durable units, often strengthened by institutional embeddedness. By contrast, others like Raymond et al. (2014) and Panke and Petersohn (2016) highlight their flexibility and fluidity, stressing processes of contestation, partial diffusion, and even “norm death.” This central tension allows research to treat norms as both outcomes to be explained (dependent variables) and as causal forces (independent variables). Debates about the importance of norms have developed across sub-disciplines such as international relations, environmental governance, and citizen participation.

## Norms in International Relations

As dependent variables, IR research focuses on norms’ emergence, diffusion, and evolution. Winston (2017) conceptualizes them as a tripartite structure of (i) a problem, (ii) a value that renders the problem salient, and (iii) a behavior regarded as appropriate. To reconcile debates about norms’ stability and flexibility, the author develops the concept of norm clusters, bounded yet adaptable sets of problem-value-behavior combinations. These clusters allow actors to adopt different combinations while remaining part of the same normative “family,” enabling scholars to trace partial diffusion and adaptation.

Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2019) introduce the notion of norm robustness, the degree to which norms retain validity (discursive acceptance) and facticity (behavioral guidance). The authors

operationalize robustness through four indicators: concordance (acceptance in treaties or discourse), third-party reactions to violations (e.g., sanctions), compliance (diffusion of consistent behaviors), and implementation (institutional incorporation). Their findings show that a norm's endurance or erosion depends less on the power of challengers than on structural factors, such as institutionalization and embeddedness, and the form of contestation itself. For example, Zeng et al. (2017) discuss how China's efforts to promote an international norm of state primacy in regulating digital infrastructure and information traffic were largely ineffective due to the norm's structural weaknesses. The norm was subject to strong domestic debate and failed to establish a coherent alternative to foreign approaches. While one strand of research reflects a largely top-down constructivist view of norm formation and change, where norms emerge through explicit deliberation, other research stresses bottom-up dynamics, where norms' cycles are shaped by patterned practices. Bode and Huelss (2018) show that with Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS), norms can emerge through practices of development, testing, and deployment, rather than public debate or legal codification. These "procedural norms" may even contradict fundamental normative commitments, yet they can still become dominant by shaping what is considered appropriate in practice.

As independent variables, norms are studied for their effects on state behavior and hierarchy. Towns and Rumelili (2017) argue that norms rank states, producing differentiated pressures. They distinguish between absolute norms (fixed benchmarks, e.g., "human rights standards") and relative norms (performance-based, e.g., "business-friendliness indices"), as well as between homogenizing norms (which rank states within a shared category, e.g., "gender equality") and heterogenizing norms (which differentiate them into distinct categories, e.g., "civilized" vs. "barbarous"). This framework explains why some standards, particularly absolute and homogenizing norms, tend to foster compliance, while relative and heterogenizing norms are more likely to provoke contestation or rejection.

Finally, scholars explore norm death. Panke and Petersohn (2016) identify the conditions under which norms disappear entirely. Through six security-related case studies, they show that outcomes of the norm erosion process depend on the strength of challengers relative to defenders, the degree of institutional embedding, and the precision of the norm.

## Environmental Norms

The literature on environmental norms provides a lens for examining how ecological standards emerge, diffuse, and shape behavior. As dependent variables, research investigates the conditions under which new norms take hold. For instance, Dauvergne (2018) analyzes the antimicrobead norm, showing how scientific consensus, activist campaigns, and low-cost corporate adaptation facilitated rapid global diffusion. The case illustrates both the power of environmental norms, leading to bans and voluntary corporate phaseouts, and their limitations, since adoption was uneven and hindered by various stakeholders.

Conversely, as independent variables, environmental norms are studied for their effects on individual attitudes and political behavior. Bolsen et al. (2014) used experiments to analyze how communications influence attitudes toward climate change. Their findings show that negative descriptive norms (suggesting public opposition to climate action) significantly discourage individual willingness to take personal actions. In contrast, positive norms and scientific consensus cues have modest effects but can reduce partisan polarization.

## Intergroup Norms

Research on intergroup norms of political participation examines how group identities, cultural practices, and institutional contexts shape expectations about who participates in politics and how. As dependent variables, scholars analyze how such norms emerge and change. Suhay (2014) highlights how group membership and emotional

attachment foster conformity, showing that positive emotions such as pride and solidarity reinforce alignment with in-group norms, while negative emotions such as anger deepen polarization. Hagström and Gustafsson (2015) extend this perspective to national identity, arguing that emotions such as shame, fear, and pride play a central role in how collective self-perceptions are challenged or maintained, thereby reconfiguring participation norms. Bilewicz and Soral (2020) further examine normative change under conditions of hate speech. They show how exposure to derogatory discourse desensitizes individuals, normalizes discrimination, and fosters contempt, thereby eroding antidiscriminatory norms. Their epidemic model demonstrates how such changes spread unless countered by strong legal or social enforcement and empathy-based interventions.

Scholars also extend the analysis of intergroup norms beyond identity and emotion to consider how broader orientations and dispositions shape participation. Copeland (2014) shows that boycotting, being conflict- and punishment-oriented, aligns with traditional *dutiful citizenship norms* (emphasizing obligation, loyalty, and deference), while boycotting, being cooperative and reward-oriented, aligns with *engaged citizenship norms* (emphasizing voluntary activity, independent opinion, and helping others). Dinesen et al. (2014) instead highlight the role of personality traits, demonstrating that Agreeableness, Openness, and Conscientiousness correlate with different citizenship norms, generalized trust, and civic engagement. At the policy level, Mols et al. (2015) critique “nudging” as governance by stealth, arguing that sustainable participation requires identity-based norm internalization rather than external manipulation.

As independent variables, intergroup norms are studied for their effects on political behavior and inclusion. Newman et al., (2021) documents how racially inflammatory rhetoric can weaken equality norms, emboldening prejudice, while Valentim (2021) shows that parliamentary representation of radical right parties reduces stigma, making individuals more likely to express previously hidden preferences. Robinson and Gottlieb (2021) underscores how cultural practices, such as

matrilineality, can reshape social expectations and reduce gender gaps in political participation, while Raymond et al. (2014) theorizes how intentional norm reframing and innovation can shift institutional constraints, fostering broader inclusion.

## Future Directions

Although debated, norms remain an indispensable concept in political science. They capture the social glue that binds communities together, the pressures that influence the behavior of states and individuals, and the standards by which people are judged. Scholarship shows that norms are fragile in the face of elite transgressions, yet powerful when embedded in institutions or identities.

Looking ahead, research will likely refine conceptual precision and measurement (Helmke & Rath, 2025) while examining the fragility of norms under democratic backsliding and crises, particularly when populist and authoritarian actors exploit or erode them (Newman et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2017). Another possible direction is the integration of psychological and sociological mechanisms—such as identity, emotions, and personality—into models of norm dynamics (Mols et al., 2015; Hagström & Gustafsson, 2015; Dinesen et al., 2014). Finally, greater attention is being paid to norm multiplicity and contestation, moving beyond linear “cascade” models to explore how norms coexist, compete, and sometimes die (Panke & Petersohn, 2016; Winston, 2017).

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