Changing Harmful Norms

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Conference in Honor of Guido Tabellini
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Guido's contributions to Economics of Culture

- Scope of **cooperation**
  - Values & incentives (Tabellini 2008)
- Culture & **social organization**
  - Clan vs. corporation, China vs. Europe (Greif-Tabellini 2017; Mokyr-Tabellini 2024; Greif-Mokyr-Tabellini 2025)
- Culture & **institutions**
  - Development across European regions (Tabellini 2010)
  - Coevolution of culture, institutions & policymaking (Persson-Tabellini 2021)
- **Identity** & political outcomes
  - Cultural conflict (Gennaioli-Tabellini 2024)

This talk: Harmful norms

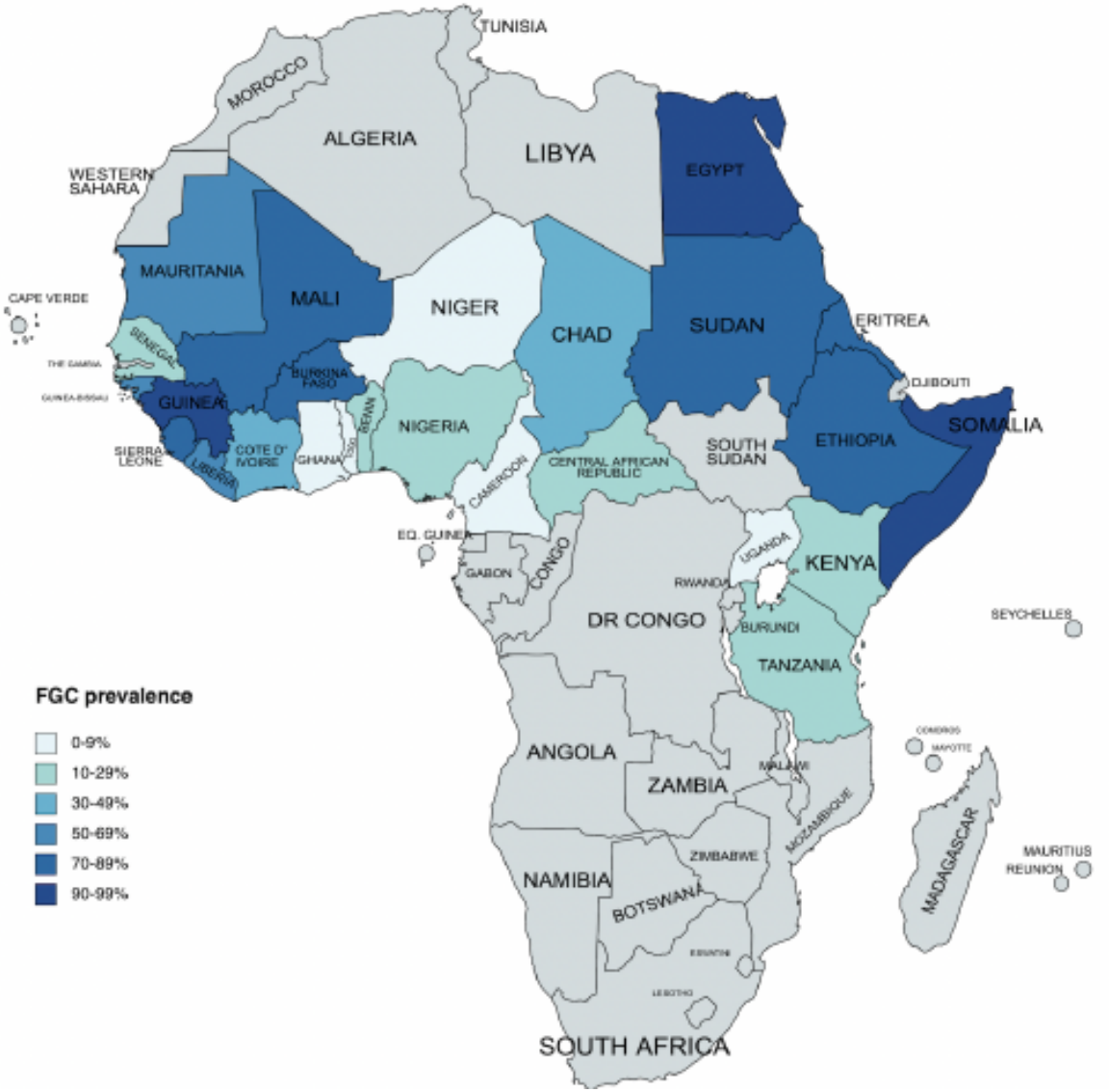
- Harmful norms persist across countries, epecially poorer ones (e.g., child marriage, dowry payments, female genital cutting)
- How can they be eradicated? Shall we rely on their "natural evolution", or is there scope for policy intervention?

1. **Evolution** of norms
   - Transitions from more to less harmful practices
2. **Policies** to change harmful norms
   - Role of information and misperceptions

Case study: Female Genital Cutting (FGC)

- FGC is the practice of cutting or removing part of the female genitalia for non-medical reasons
- Initiation ritual for girls b/w infancy & age 15 (typically 8-11 years old). Performed in a non-hospital setting
- More than 200 million women cut worldwide. Every year, 4m girls at risk of FGC. (UNICEF, 2022)
- Serious health consequences, at time of cutting and later in life

FGC prevalence in Africa



I. Norm transitions

A Stepping Stone Approach to Norm Transitions

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Trinity College Dublin

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BRAC

Peyton Young
Oxford

Motivation

Conventional approach by governments and NGOs: outright abandonment of harmful norm $\Rightarrow$ often ineffective

If the goal is elimination of a harmful norm in the long run, what are the consequences of having a **'mildly harmful'** alternative?

Example: in Somalia, two types of FGC:

- Sunna (WHO types I - II): less invasive
- Pharaonic (WHO type III): extremely invasive

Does intermediate alternative facilitate transition?

Leaving aside moral principles, answer not trivial
On the **positive** side:

- People reluctant to completely abandon a harmful trait T may be persuaded to go from T to a less harmful alternative t
- Once the first step is taken, it may be easier to take further steps and eventually eliminate the harmful trait $\rightarrow$ stepping-stone convergence

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On the **negative** side:

- Precisely because t is less costly, incentives to abandon it are lower and it may become an **absorbing state**

This paper

Theory

- Develop a theory of social norms that allows for **more than two actions**
- Study transition dynamics
- Derive conditions under which a stepping stone transition occurs

Empirics

- Develop an econometric approach to test whether conditions for stepping stone transition are satisfied
- Apply this approach to FGC using original survey data from Somalia

Model setup

- Agents: large but finite number m
- Actions: $A = \{L, M, H\}$
  - $L =$ Pharaonic, $M =$ Sunna, $H =$ Uncut
- p_i : proportion of players playing action i

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  - $L =$ Pharaonic, $M =$ Sunna, $H =$ Uncut
- p_i : proportion of players playing action i
- Utility of action i state p:

$$v_i(p) = \underbrace{u_i}_{\text{intrinsic utility}} \underbrace{- \sum_{j \in A} s_{ji} p_j}_{\text{social utility}} + \epsilon_i$$

s_{ji} : pressure that agents playing j exert on those playing i

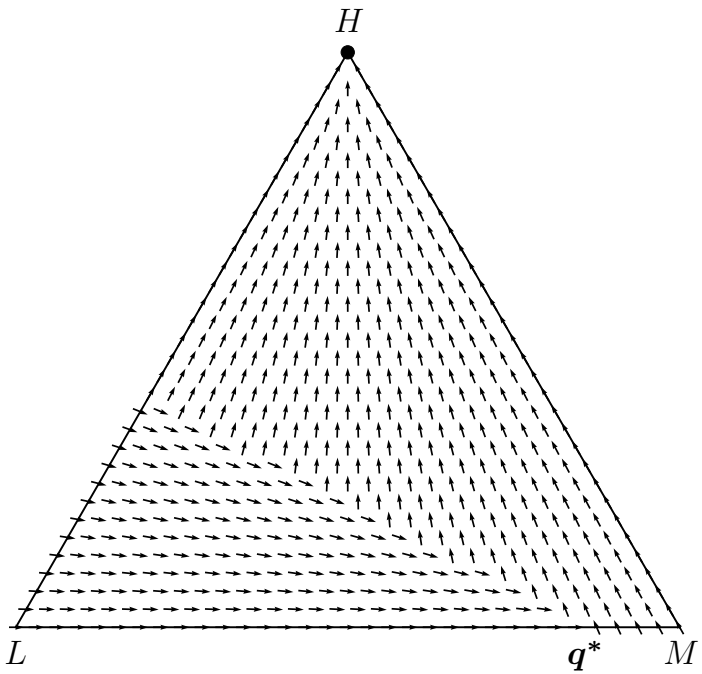
ϵ_i : iid shock, extreme-value distributed

Model setup

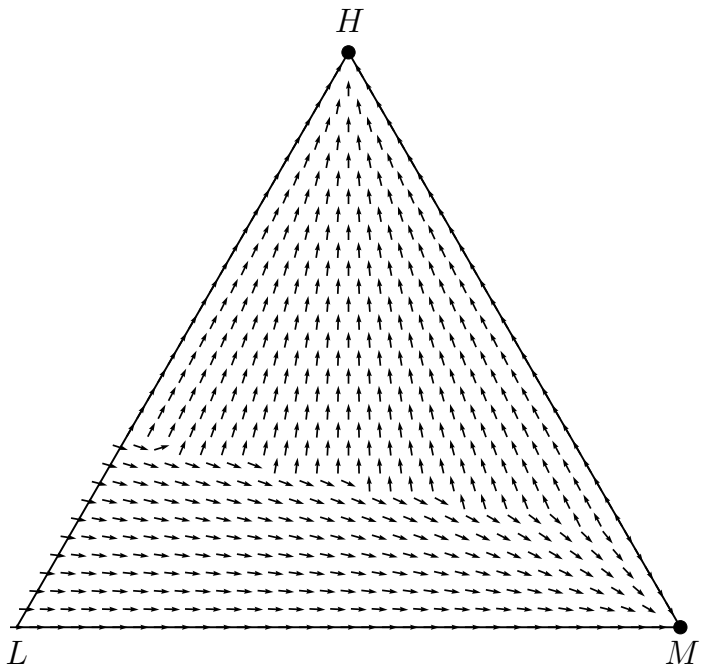
Assumptions

- Intrinsic utility ranking: $u_L < u_M < u_H$
- Positive social pressure: $s_{ij} > 0$ for all $j \neq i$ ($s_{ii} = 0$). Asymmetry allowed
- Time is continuous; agents receive revision opportunities at random intervals and choose perturbed best responses to current state p

Best-response dynamics



M is a stepping stone



M isn't a stepping stone

Conditions for stepping stone

Theorem. Under the best response dynamics, M is a stepping stone iff

$$\frac{s_{LH} - s_{LM}}{u_H - u_M} > 1, \quad \frac{s_{LM}}{u_M - u_L} \leq 1, \quad \frac{s_{MH}}{u_H - u_M} \leq 1$$

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Social cost of switching from L to H is *high* relative to gain in intrinsic utility

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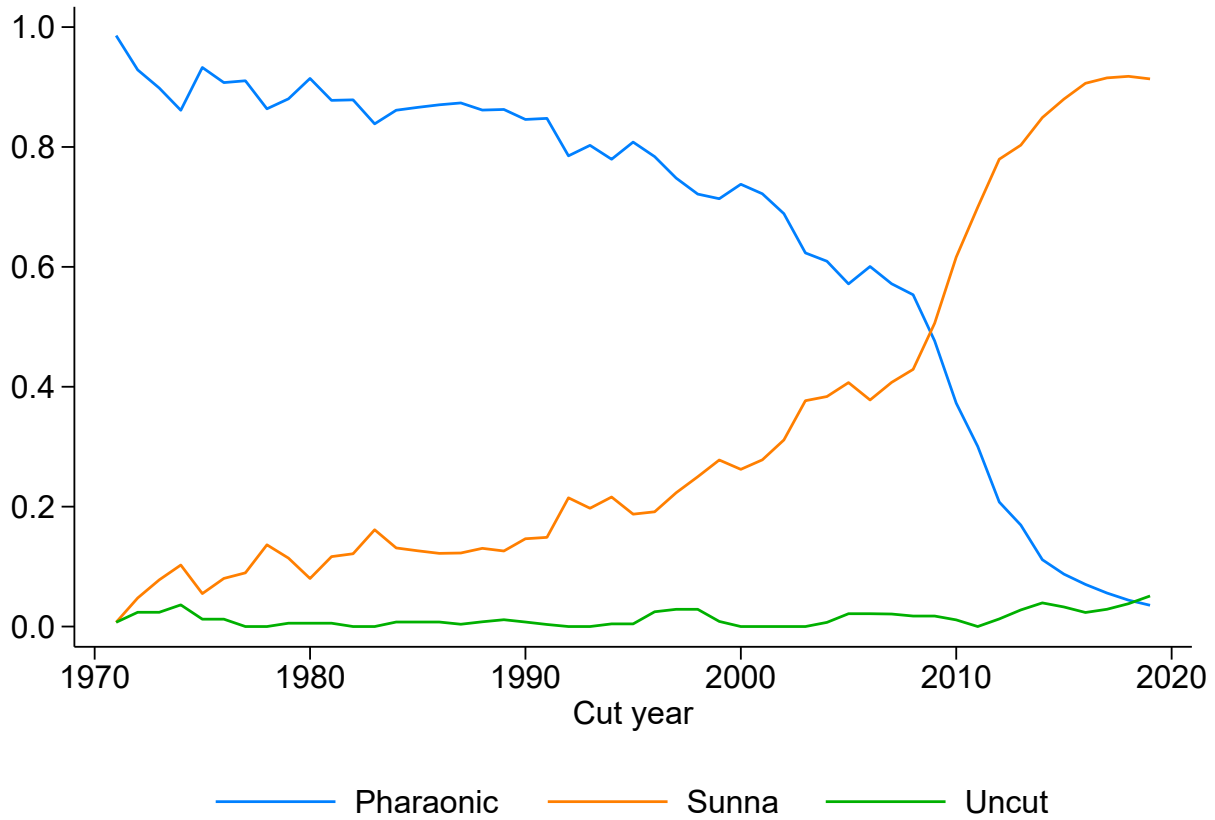
Necessary cond. for M to be a stepping stone is the *reverse triangle inequality*: $s_{LH} > s_{LM} + s_{MH}$

Empirical evidence: FGC transitions in Somalia



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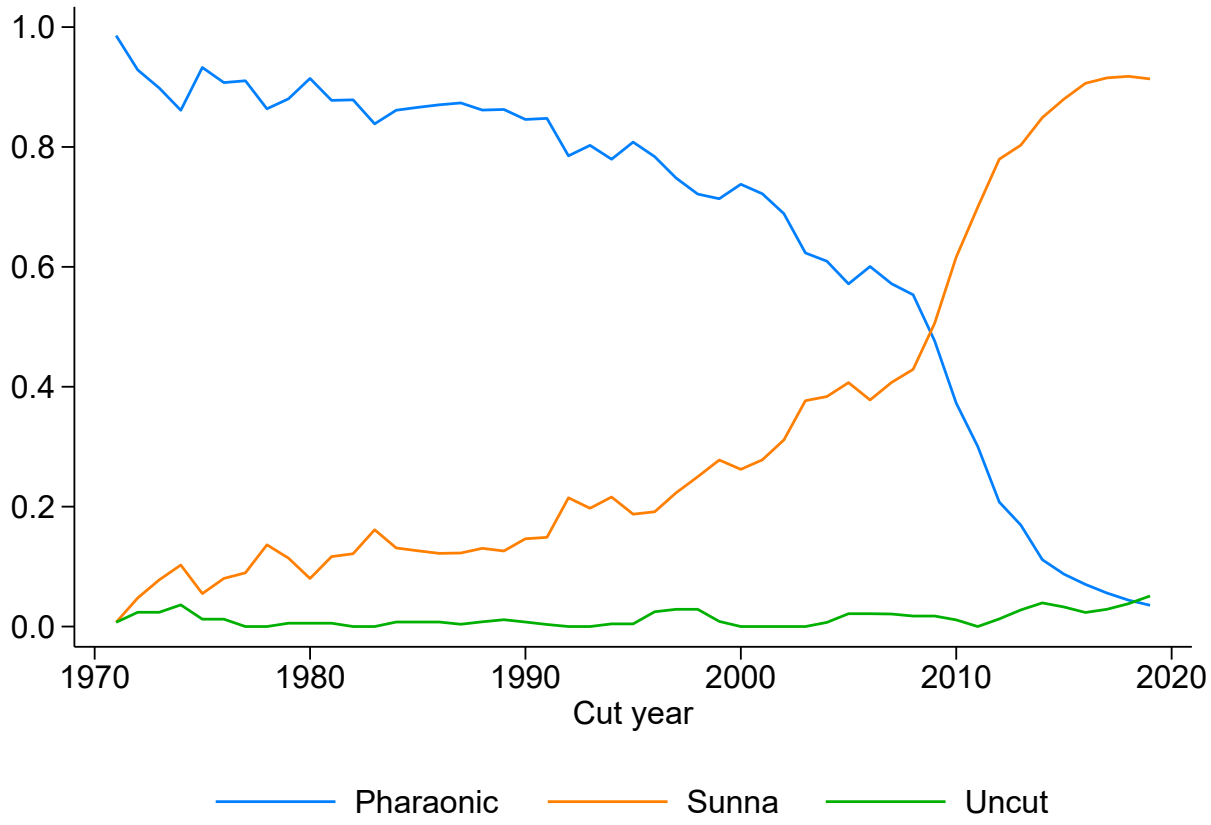

- Is Sunna a stepping stone? Three tests from the model (*I will only show two*)

Test 1: Reverse triangle inequality

- Reverse triangle inequality is a necessary condition for stepping stone if heterogeneity is not too large
- Under the logit model w/ linear sanctions, we have

$$\frac{1}{\beta} \ln \left(\frac{\sigma_H(p)}{\sigma_M(p)} \right) = \alpha + \gamma p_H + \lambda(s_{LM} + s_{MH} - s_{LH}) p_L$$

- Reverse triangle inequality holds *iff* the coefficient on p_L is negative

Test 1: Reverse triangle inequality

Regress log-odds ratio (Uncut/Sunna) flow on Uncut and Pharaonic stock year

	Log-ratio Uncut flow to Sunna flow		
Uncut stock	109.843***	35.200***	36.608**
	(18.484)	(6.312)	(11.628)
Pharaonic stock	3.689***	5.128***	5.752***
	(0.577)	(0.732)	(0.620)
Constant	-7.365***	-6.756***	-7.227***
	(0.641)	(0.536)	(0.371)
Sample	Year	Year-District	Year-District
District F.E.	No	No	Yes
Adjusted R^2	0.616	0.561	0.631
Observations	38	60	60

- Coeff. on p_L positive $\Rightarrow$ suggestive evidence that reverse triangle ineq. does not hold

Test 2: Extrapolation

- Estimate model parameters and simulate the implied dynamics to see if the system converges to H

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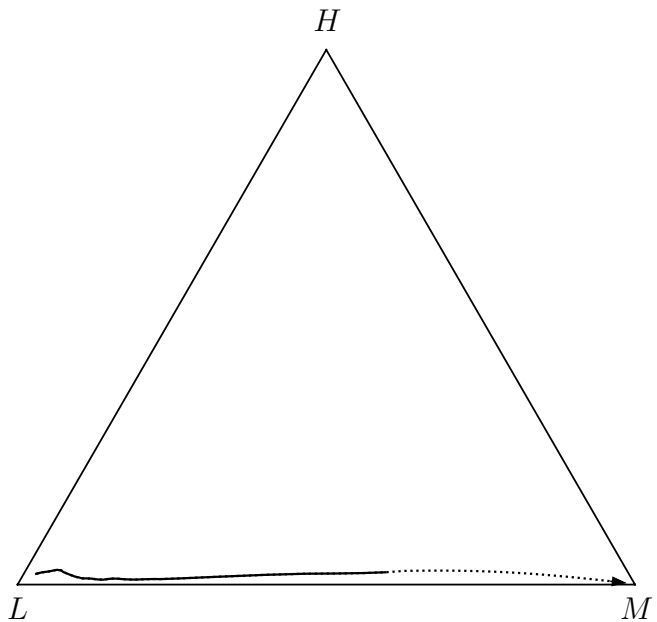
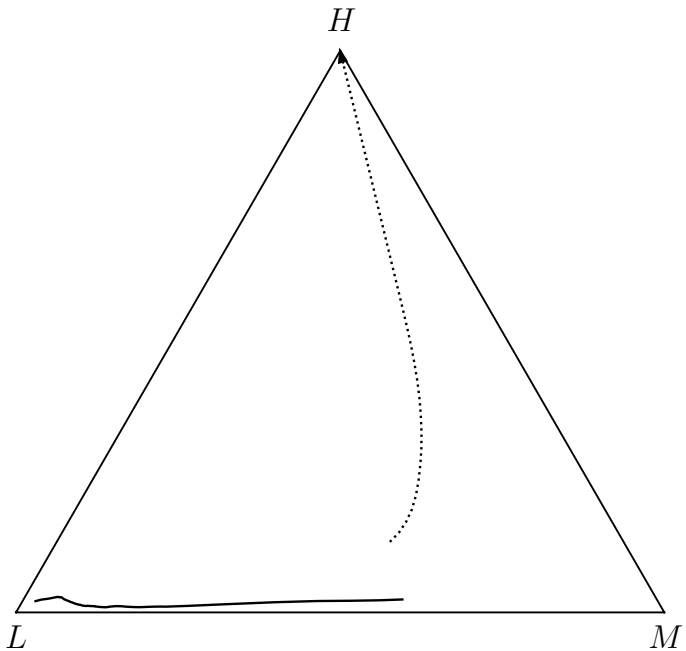
- Estimate model parameters and simulate the implied dynamics to see if the system converges to H
- Suggests that Sunna is *not* a stepping stone



Extrapolation – policy counterfactual

Exog. shift in p: Suppose a targeted policy led 10% of agents to shift from Sunna to Uncut



- Triggers convergence to Uncut norm
- Scope for policy interventions

II. Policy interventions

Changing Harmful Norms through Information and Coordination. Experimental Evidence from Somalia

P. Ferreira — HKS
S. Gulesci — Trinity College Dublin
E. La Ferrara — HKS
D. Smerdon — U. of Queensland
M. Sulaiman — BRAC

This paper

Intervention

- Large-scale RCT with >8,000 men and women in 141 communities in Somalia
- 3 treatments randomized at community level, aimed at addressing:
  - T1: pluralistic ignorance
  - T2: coordination through public declarations
  - T3: both

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Pilot

- Revealed high support for Sunna (hence low scope for correcting misperceptions), but low support for Pharaonic $\rightarrow$ work w/ Pharaonic

Experimental design

Common structure to all experimental arms. Community meetings where participants:

- Cast anonymous vote on whether they favor abolishing Pharaonic
- Are incentivized to guess share in favor of abolishing Pharaonic
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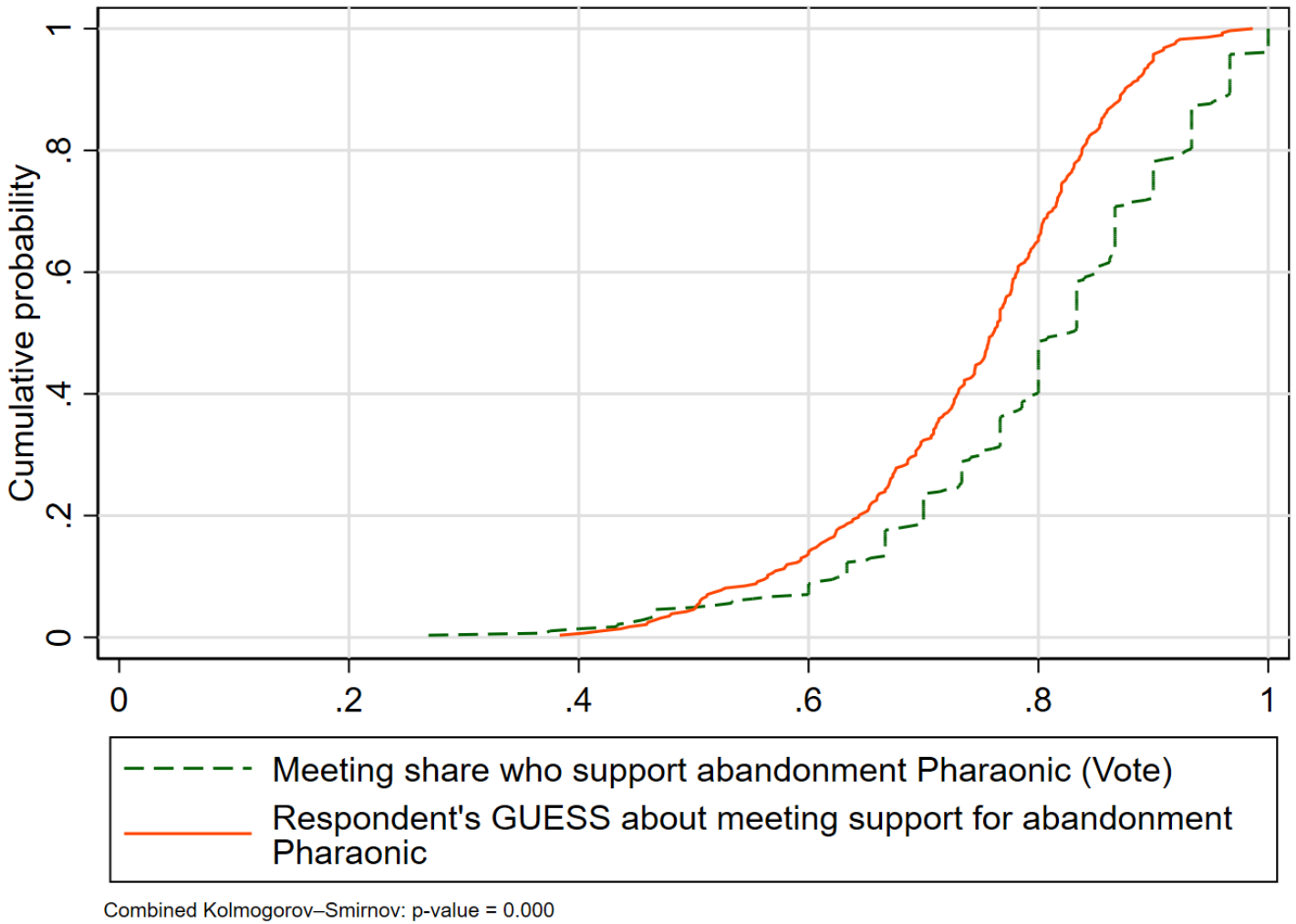
- T3 (T1+T2): Reveal results of the poll, then public declaration

Evidence of pluralistic ignorance at baseline



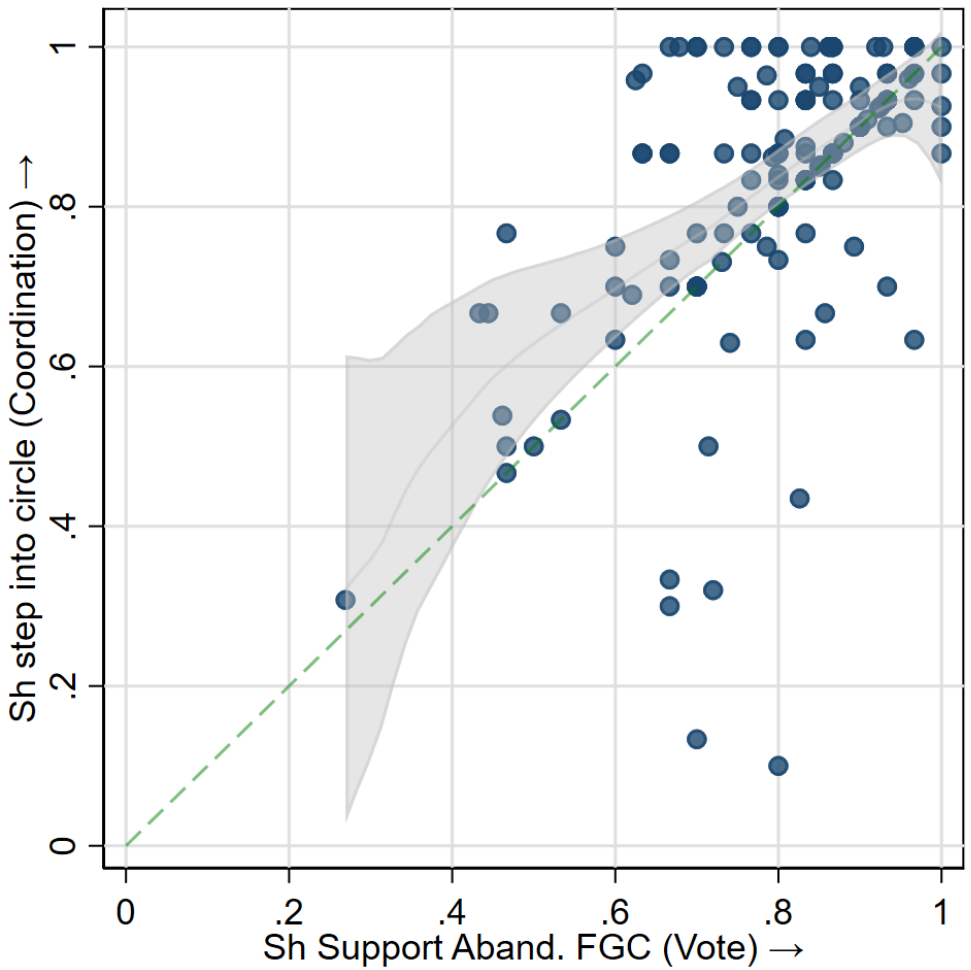
Impact: current cuts + future plans

	(1) Pharaonic cut or plan to be (yes=1)	(2) Sunna cut or plan to be (yes=1)	(3) Uncut, planned NOT to be cut (yes=1)
T1 : Poll + Announcement	-0.018	-0.014	0.032***
	(0.011)	(0.017)	(0.010)
T2 : Poll + Coordination	-0.007	0.005	0.007
	(0.011)	(0.017)	(0.010)
T3 : Poll + Announce. + Coord.	-0.008	-0.003	0.016*
	(0.011)	(0.016)	(0.009)
F pairwise:			
T1 vs T2	0.386	0.273	0.039
T1 vs T3	0.328	0.488	0.136
T2 vs T3	0.984	0.652	0.402
Observations	6452	6452	6452
Mean in control	0.054	0.888	0.036
Sample:	Full	Full	Full

- T1 *doubles* the share of daughters uncut and with no plans to be cut
- T3 increases it by 50%
- Effect driven by those who underestimated support for abandoning Pharaonic at baseline

What happened with T2?

Share expressing public support vs.
Share who voted for abandonment



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- but not everywhere...

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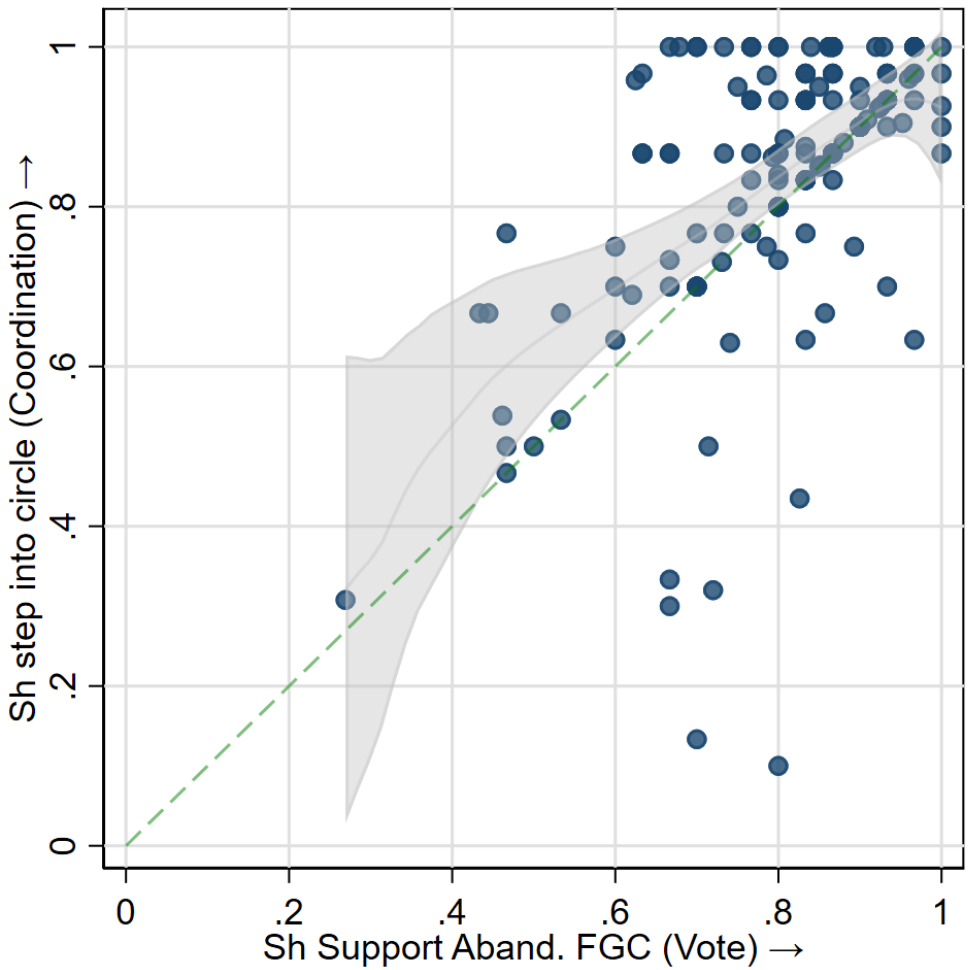

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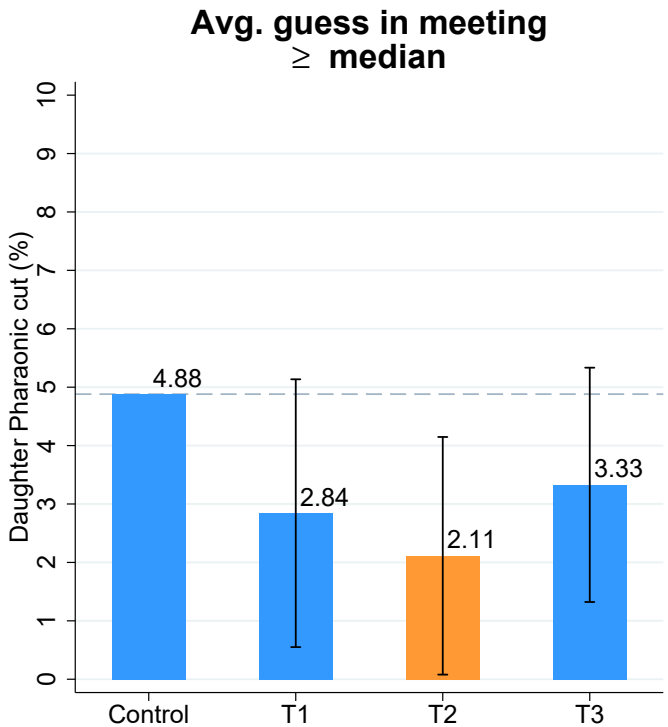
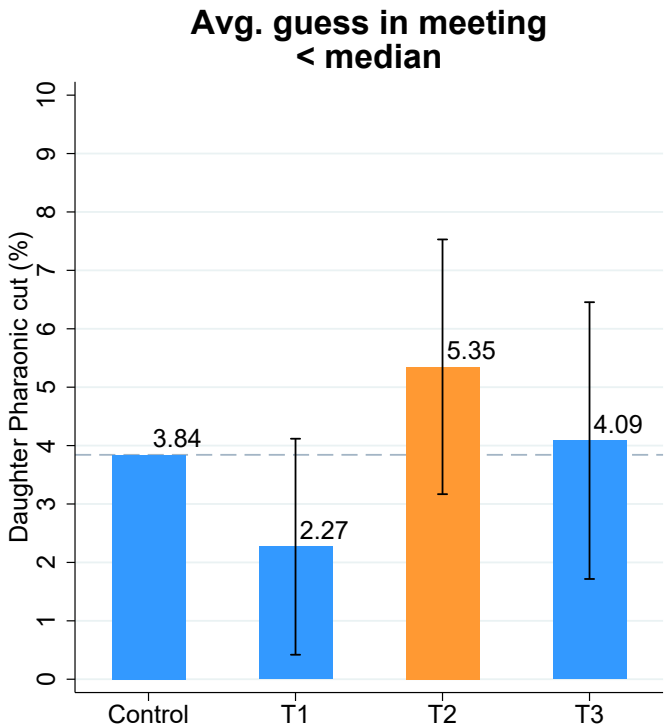
- Share stepped into circle higher in meetings w/ higher priors about others' willingness to abandon

T2 worked in meetings w/ high priors

Compare meetings w/ avg. priors above vs. below median





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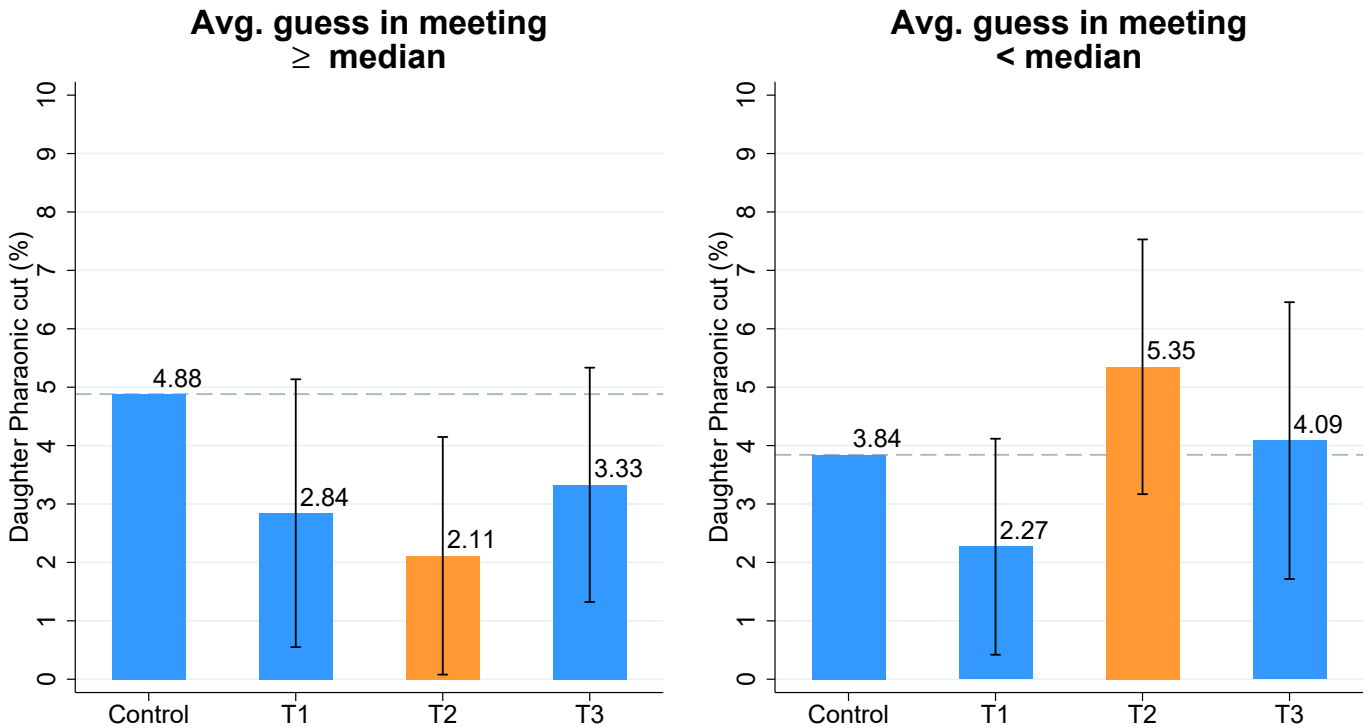

- Similar results for T3

Conclusions

- Important to study dynamic **evolution of norms** and understand trade-offs embedded in policy interventions
- **Intermediate alternatives** may be a double-edged sword
- Behavioral insights can help understand and influence norm adherence
- Promising avenue: design interventions that factor in existing **beliefs** and preserve cultural value of traditional norms
- Future work: important to study interplay b/w identity, beliefs and **coordination**

Thank you!

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