

# Democracy in America?

## Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States

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First draft: March 2018, Current version: December 2018

### Abstract

Is support for democracy in the United States robust enough to deter undemocratic behavior by elected politicians? We develop a model of the public as a democratic check and evaluate it using two empirical strategies: an original, nationally representative candidate choice experiment in which some politicians take positions that violate key democratic principles, and a natural experiment that occurred during Montana's 2017 special election for U.S. House. Our research design allows us to infer Americans' willingness to trade-off democratic principles for other valid but potentially conflicting considerations such as political ideology, partisan loyalty, and policy preferences. We find the U.S. public's viability as a democratic check to be strikingly limited: only a small fraction of Americans prioritize democratic principles in their electoral choices and their tendency to do so is decreasing in the strength of their partisanship, policy extremism, and in candidate platform polarization. Our findings echo classic arguments about the importance of political moderation and cross-cutting cleavages for democratic stability and highlight the dangers that political polarization represents for democracy.

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*“It is the function of public opinion to check the use of force in a crisis, so that men,  
driven to make terms, may live and let live.”*

Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (1925, 64)

*“I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose voters.”*

Donald Trump at a presidential campaign rally in Iowa (January 23, 2016)

## 1 Introduction

“It is nearly impossible to find an American who says that he is opposed to democracy or favors some alternative. . . On the contrary, nearly everyone professes to believe that democracy is the best form of government.” This is how Robert A. Dahl, writing in 1966, summarized contemporary evidence for the support for democracy in the United States (Dahl, 1966, 40). It remains conventional wisdom to this day. Research that traces its intellectual origins to Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* finds that the United States consistently exhibits some of the highest levels of support for democracy in the world (Almond and Verba, 1963; Inglehart and Welzel, 2010; Norris, 2011).

In this paper, we show that this conventional wisdom rests on fragile foundations. We adopt an approach that, instead of asking about support for democracy directly, infers respondents’ commitment to democratic principles from their choices of candidates in hypothetical election scenarios. Each candidate is experimentally assigned attributes and platforms that approximate real-world elections and, crucially, may include positions that violate key democratic principles. In this framework, voters are said to “support democracy” when their choices reveal a preference for democratic principles over other

valid but potentially conflicting considerations such as political ideology, partisan loyalty, or favorite policies.

This research design builds on the observation that elections represent a fundamental instrument of democratic self-defense: Especially in advanced democracies, voters have the opportunity to stop politicians who violate democratic norms by defeating them at the polls. According to this line of reasoning, democracy is self-enforcing when politicians anticipate that, were they to behave undemocratically, their own supporters would punish them by voting for a competitor.

We argue that a key obstacle to the viability of such a democratic check is partisan, ideological, and policy-based polarization. In polarized societies, electoral competition often confronts voters with a choice between two valid but potentially conflicting considerations: democratic values and partisan interests. When faced with the choice between a candidate whose positions violate democratic principles but whose policies they find appealing and one who complies with democratic principles but is otherwise unappealing, a significant fraction of voters will be willing to sacrifice democratic principles in favor of electing candidate who champions their interests. In a sharply polarized electorate, even pro-democratically minded voters may act as partisans first and democrats only second.

In section 3, we formalize these intuitions and develop a model of the public as a democratic check. We extend the classic, spatial framework for voter preferences to account for undemocratic candidate positions. The latter are conceptualized as negative valence attributes: while voters may differ over policy, ideology, or partisanship, they agree that electoral competition should be democratic and prefer candidates that compete fairly. This framework implies that i) voters will be willing to trade-off democratic principles for other, potentially competing political goals, ii) centrists provide the most viable check on candidates that undermine democratic principles, and iii) elections are most likely to fail as

a democratic check in polarized societies. We further show that both voter and candidate polarization are *independently* detrimental to democracy. We employ this framework to guide the design of our experiment and the analysis of our data.

Our empirical results suggest that the viability of the U.S. public as a pro-democratic electoral check is surprisingly limited. We consistently find that only a small fraction of Americans are willing to prioritize democratic principles in their electoral choices when doing so goes against their partisan identification, political ideology, or favorite policies. Most Americans are partisans first and democrats only second.

The following is a preview of our experimental findings, which we present in sections 4 and 5:

- **Americans value democracy, but not much:** A candidate who considers adopting an undemocratic position can expect to be punished by losing only about 11% of his overall vote share.
- **Support for democracy is highly elastic:** When the price of voting for a more democratic candidate is that candidate’s greater distance from the voter in terms of policies or partisanship, even the most centrist voters are only willing to tolerate at most a 10-15% increase in such a distance.
- **Centrists are a pro-democratic force:** Voters who are moderate in their policy preferences, ideology, or partisanship punish undemocratic candidates at higher rates than voter with more extreme preferences.
- **Most voters are partisans first and democrats only second:** Less than 15% of our respondents are willing to punish a co-partisan for violating democratic principles when the price of that punishment is voting against their own party. Only independents and partisan “leaners” support the more democratic candidate enough

to defeat the undemocratic candidate regardless of his partisan affiliation. This gets worse when we limit attention to combinations of party and policy that we typically see in the real world.

- **Voters employ a partisan “double standard:”** Conservative respondents are more willing to punish undemocratic behavior by Democratic Party than Republican Party candidates and vice-versa. In most of our specifications, these effects hold equally for both Democrats and Republicans. Most Americans are “instrumental” rather than “principled” democrats.
- **Platform polarization is bad for democracy:** The larger the difference between the candidates’ policy platforms, the weaker the punishment for undemocratic behavior.
- **Sensitivity to the menu of manipulation varies:** Voters are most sensitive to undemocratic positions that undermine the free press, checks and balances, and those that aim to disenfranchise opposition supporters.
- **Strong partisans punish undemocratic behavior by abstaining:** The stronger a respondent’s preference for a candidate, the more likely she is to abstain rather than defect when that candidate adopts an undemocratic position.
- **Americans have a solid understanding of what democracy is and what it is not:** The vast majority of our respondents correctly distinguish real-world undemocratic practices from those that are consistent with democratic principles.

These results obtain in spite of the fact that – just as in earlier studies – our respondents profess a strong commitment to democracy when measured by conventional, direct-questioning techniques. For instance, when asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 10

“how important [it is for them] to live in a country that is governed democratically,” more than 80% of our respondents given an answer of 8 to 10, with a median answer of 9. This is statistically indistinguishable from answers to the same question in major surveys like the Americas Barometer and the World Values Survey. Put differently, conventionally measured support for democracy appears to be mostly cheap talk. In turn, our existing knowledge about the support for democracy in the United States is of alarmingly limited use when it comes to answering a key question: When can we realistically expect the American public to serve as a check on the authoritarian temptations of elected politicians?

We move from analyzing hypothetical election scenarios to a real-world election in section 6, where we examine a natural experiment that occurred during the 2017 special election for Montana’s only seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. On the day before the election, one of the two major candidates assaulted a journalist, which we interpret as a negative public signal about his respect for a free press. Crucially, only in-person voters saw this signal before they could cast a ballot; absentee voters, who in Montana make up a majority of registered voters, had already cast their ballots. This allows us to adopt a difference-in-differences empirical strategy that compares precinct-level vote shifts between absentee and in-person voters to infer their willingness to punish the candidate for the attack on the journalist. Our findings are consistent with both our theoretical expectations and experimental results: Montanans value a free press, but not enough for most partisans to abandon their favored candidate.

## 2 Related Research

[INCOMPLETE]

- **The 2016 Election and the American Democracy:** [Carey et al. \(2018\)](#), [Huq](#)

and Ginsburg (2017), Kaufman and Haggard (Forthcoming), Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), Lieberman et al. (Forthcoming), Miller et al. (2017), Przeworski (2017).

- **Democratic Backsliding and Electoral Authoritarianism:** Levitsky and Way (2010a), Lust and Waldner (2015), Svobik (2017).
- **Civic Culture and Support for Democracy:** Almond and Verba (1963), Norris (2011), Alexander and Welzel (2017), Foa and Mounk (2017), Norris (2017), Voeten (2017).
- **Polarization and American Politics:** Abramowitz and Saunders (2008), Hetherington and Weiler (2009), Levendusky (2009), McCarty et al. (2008).

### 3 A Model of the Public as a Democratic Check

Consider a model according to which two sets of candidate attributes determine voters' electoral choices: i) voters' preferences over positional issues, which may include policy positions, ideology, and partisan affiliation, and ii) voters' support for democracy. We think of voters' support for democracy as a valence issue. In other words, while voters may differ over policy, ideology, or partisanship, they all agree that electoral competition should be democratic and prefer candidates that compete fairly.

Formally, voter  $i$ 's payoff from candidate  $j$  is

$$u_i(X_j, M_j) = - \sum_K \alpha_k (x_{ik} - x_{jk})^2 - \delta M_j, \quad (1)$$

where  $x_{ik}$  is voter  $i$ 's favorite policy on issue  $k$ ,  $x_{jk}$  is candidate  $j$ 's platform on issue  $k$ , and  $\alpha_k$  is the weight that  $i$  attaches to that issue. Meanwhile,  $M_j$  is candidate  $j$ 's democracy platform where  $M$  is increasing in how undemocratic  $j$ 's platform is (i.e.  $M$  stands for

“manipulation.”) Thus we may think of all voters’ ideal democracy platforms as being zero, resulting in the quadratic formulation above. The term  $\delta$  is the weight that  $i$  attaches to fair democratic competition – in effect, the intensity of  $i$ ’s support for democracy. Normalizing both policy and democracy weights so that they sum to one yields

$$\delta = 1 - \sum_K \alpha_k .$$

A key implication of this model is that voters who hold intense policy preferences (a large  $\alpha_k$ ) or extreme policy preferences ( $x_{ik}$  to the left or right of both candidates’ platforms) are willing to tolerate undemocratic behavior by their favored candidate. Formally, assuming only a single policy issue,  $i$  votes for candidate 1 as long as  $u_i(X_1, M_1) \geq u_i(X_2, M_2)$ , or equivalently as long as

$$x_{ik} \leq \frac{x_{1k} + x_{2k}}{2} - \frac{\delta(M_1 - M_2)}{2\alpha_k(x_{2k} - x_{1k})} , \tag{2}$$

where we are assuming that candidate 1’s policy platform is to the left of candidate 2’s platform.

Call the voter whose ideal policy point  $x_{ik}$  barely satisfies the above inequality the *swing voter*. Note that the first term on the right-hand side of this inequality is the midpoint between the two candidates’ policy platforms, i.e. it separates the electorate into those who are policy-wise closer to candidate 1 and those who are closer to candidate 2. The swing voter is in turn located either to the left or to the right of this midpoint, depending on whether it is candidate 1 or candidate 2 who adopts an undemocratic platform.

When candidate 1 adopts an undemocratic platform, the swing voter is located to the left of the midpoint  $\frac{x_{1k} + x_{2k}}{2}$ . Voters to the left of the midpoint between the two candidate’s platforms but to the right of the swing voter favor candidate 1 based on their policy



preferences, yet are sufficiently put off by his undemocratic platform to vote for candidate 2 instead. By contrast, voters whose ideal policies are to the left of the swing voter are willing to tolerate candidate 1’s undemocratic platform as their support for democracy is outweighed by their proximity to his policies. The converse holds when candidate 2 adopts an undemocratic platform. The two swing voters are

$$x_s^1, x_s^2 = \frac{x_{1k} + x_{2k}}{2} \pm \frac{\delta}{2\alpha_k(x_{2k} - x_{1k})}. \quad (3)$$

The segment between the two swing voters thus corresponds to the portion of the electorate that always votes against the candidate who adopts an undemocratic platform. We may refer to these voters as “democracy first” voters. This segment is increasing in the size of the support for democracy parameter  $\delta$  and decreasing in the weight  $\alpha_k$  that voters attach to the single policy issue and the polarization of the candidates’ platforms ( $x_{2k} - x_{1k}$ ). That is, both intense policy preferences and the polarization of platforms make voter more willing to sacrifice democratic principles.

Denote the expected “unfair” vote gain from an undemocratic platform for a candidate by  $\mu_j$ . We may say that the public successfully checks undemocratic behavior, if  $\mu_j$  is smaller than the fraction of voters that either candidate loses due to his undemocratic platform. The latter are the voters located on the interval

$$\left[ \frac{x_{1k} + x_{2k}}{2}, \frac{x_{1k} + x_{2k}}{2} \pm \frac{\delta}{2\alpha_k(x_{2k} - x_{1k})} \right].$$

Because this interval is located in the middle of the policy space under most circumstances (e.g. in the case when candidate platforms straddle the electorate’s median on issue  $k$ ), it is less electorally consequential when the distribution of voters is “polarized,” i.e. with a weak center and heavy extremes. That is, elections are more likely

to fail as a democratic check in polarized societies.

## 4 The Candidate-Choice Experiment

The candidate-choice experiment examines a key mechanism in our framework: even voters who value democratic principles may trade off those principles for partisan ends when confronted with a choice between the two. The experiment examines this mechanism at the same level at which it is hypothesized to operate: that of the individual voter. By modelling one of the most essential and familiar actions that voters perform – the choice between two candidates in an election – the conjoint-based design we introduce below probes our respondents’ willingness to trade off democratic principles for partisan interests without alerting them to our interest in that aspect of their choice.<sup>1</sup>

In the candidate-choice experiment, respondents made a series of 16 choices, each between two candidates for a state legislature. The candidates were described by experimentally manipulated attributes typically seen in real-world elections: age, gender, race, profession, years of experience, partisan affiliation, two policy platforms, and a “democracy” position. This last attribute is the focus of our analysis; we therefore describe its design and assignment below. We introduce most of the remaining attributes throughout the paper. In the appendix, we outline the design and assignment of all attributes and present an example of a candidate-choice scenario as seen by our respondents.

Each candidate was assigned a democracy position that was either “undemocratic” – an action or statement by the candidate that violates a key democratic principle – or a democratically neutral, “generic” position. The undemocratic positions are listed in

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<sup>1</sup>Our candidate-choice experiment belongs to a broader category of survey-experimental techniques known as conjoint experiments ([Hensher et al., 2005](#); [Hainmueller et al., 2015](#)).

Table 1: Undemocratic positions endorsed by candidates assigned to the  $D^-$  treatment condition

$D^-$	Undemocratic Position	Democratic Principle
1a	Supported a redistricting plan that gives [own party]s 2 extra seats despite a decline in the polls.	Electoral fairness
1b	Supported a redistricting plan that gives [own party]s 10 extra seats despite a decline in the polls.	Electoral fairness
2	Supported a proposal to reduce the number of polling stations in areas that support [opposite party]s.	Electoral fairness
3	Said the [own party] governor should rule by executive order if [opposite party] legislators don't cooperate.	Checks and balances
4	Said the [own party] governor should ignore unfavorable court rulings by [opposite party]-appointed judges.	Checks and balances
5	Said the [own party] governor should prosecute journalists who accuse him of misconduct without revealing sources.	Civil liberties
6a	Said the [own party] governor should ban far-left group rallies in the state capital.	Civil liberties
6b	Said the [own party] governor should ban far-right group rallies in the state capital.	Civil liberties

Table 1.<sup>2</sup> There, [own party] refers to a candidate's randomly assigned political party (Democrat or Republican); [opposite party] denotes the complement. For instance, one possible realization of item 4 read "Said the Republican governor should ignore unfavorable court rulings by Democrat-appointed judges."

In designing these undemocratic positions, we employed the following criteria:

**Conceptual validity:** The undemocratic positions capture violations of key democratic principles. Following classic scholarship on democratization (Dahl, 1971), this includes measures that undermine electoral fairness (items 1a, 1b, and 2 above), checks and

<sup>2</sup>The only difference between positions 1a and 1b is in the number of extra seats that a candidate's party obtains, a distinction in scale that we examine in section 4.4. The only difference between positions 6a and 6b is in whether the candidate advocates banning far-left or far-right group rallies. Republicans always advocated banning far-left group rallies and vice versa.

balances (items 3 and 4), and civil liberties (items 5, 6a, and 6b).<sup>3</sup>

**Contextual realism and partisan balance:** The undemocratic positions approximate practices that have been used by politicians to subvert the democratic process in the United States and can be plausibly adopted by both major parties. Accordingly, the undemocratic positions are situated at the state level, where most attempts to subvert the democratic process for partisan gain in the United States occur and have historically been attempted by both major parties. The appendix provides real-world examples of each undemocratic position.

**Incremental violations:** A key feature of attempts to subvert the democratic process, both in the United States and around the world, is the use of ostensibly legal, incremental, and complementary measures (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Svobik, 2017; Waldner and Lust, 2018). This has several consequences. First, to be implemented, such measures must often be conducted by or in conjunction with the executive. This is why some of our undemocratic positions refer to actions that the candidate suggests a co-partisan governor take. Second, because such measures are typically adopted through a constitutionally mandated process, they may undermine democratic principles without violating the law. This applies to items 1a, 1b, and 3. Finally, any single measure may allow for a partisan interpretation according to which it is consistent with some – often more majoritarian – conception of democracy or corrects for an existing deficiency in the democratic process. For instance, proponents of stricter voter ID laws respond to accusations of voter suppression by claiming such measures are needed to prevent voter fraud, and proponents of gerrymandering may claim they are correcting an existing, unfair status quo. Jointly and in their political context, however, such measures result in

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<sup>3</sup>For recent perspectives on how to conceptualize and measure democracy, see Boix et al. (2013), Cheibub et al. (2010), and Coppedge et al. (2011).

an uneven playing field that favors their proponents (Levitsky and Way, 2010b; Schedler, 2002).

**Neutral presentation:** The undemocratic positions are presented in a manner that avoids negative connotations or normatively leading language. For instance, positions 1a, 1b, and 2 are instances of gerrymandering and voter suppression, respectively, but we intentionally avoided employing such language. Put simply, we want respondents to decide for themselves whether or not a position violates a democratic principle.

Candidates not assigned to hold an undemocratic position adopted one of seven democratically neutral, “generic” positions. For instance, one of these positions read: “Served on a committee that establishes the state legislature’s schedule for each session;” we list the remaining six in the appendix. The generic positions prevent candidates not assigned to hold an undemocratic position from appearing visually conspicuous<sup>4</sup> and balance the cognitive effort required to distinguish a candidate who endorsed an undemocratic position from one that did not.

Each respondent made 16 distinct candidate choices of which 11 were based on the following experimental design:<sup>5</sup> In four randomly chosen scenarios, both candidates adopted one of the democratically neutral, “generic” positions. Throughout, we treat these as our control scenarios and label them  $D^+$  vs.  $D^+$ . In seven randomly chosen scenarios, one of the candidates adopted one of our undemocratic positions while the other held a neutral position. We refer to these as our treatment scenarios and label them  $D^-$  vs.  $D^+$ . Whether the undemocratic position was held by the candidate visually presented on the left or right was random. To simplify the presentation and analysis of our findings, we

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<sup>4</sup>This is also why we randomized the order in which candidates’ democracy and policy positions were listed.

<sup>5</sup>The remaining five scenarios featured designs intended to provide extensions and robustness checks of our core design. We introduce them in sections 4.4 and 5 and discuss in detail in the appendix.

reshape our data so that candidate 2 always holds a neutral position ( $D^+$ ) and, depending on the experimental condition, candidate 1 varies between  $D^+$  and  $D^-$ .

The candidate-choice experiment was embedded in a nationally representative survey of American voters that took place in August-September 2018.<sup>6</sup> The 1,692 respondents made a total of 21,151 candidate choices.

## 4.1 Democratic Principles versus Policy Preferences

We begin our analysis of the candidate-choice experiment by examining Americans' willingness to trade off democratic principles for their preferred policies. Each candidate proposed a platform on one economic and one social policy area. Economic policies concerned either state income taxes or state funding for local education; social policies concerned either immigration or marijuana legalization. These policy areas were randomly assigned but identical across the two candidates in a candidate-choice scenario. For each policy area, candidates were independently and randomly assigned to propose one of four possible platforms, ranging from extreme liberal to extreme conservative positions.<sup>7</sup> The appendix lists all 16 policy platforms and discusses our reasons their selection.

One week before being presented with the candidate-choice scenarios, each respondent was asked to express their support on a 0-100 proximity scale for each of the 16 policy platforms that the candidates might adopt. This allows us to identify each respondent's ideal policy in each of the four areas and, following the theoretical framework in section 3,

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<sup>6</sup>The survey was implemented via LUCID. The first wave, which asked questions about partisanship, policy preferences, and support for democracy took place on August 28-29, 2018; the primary focus of the second wave, which took place between September 4-25, 2018, was the candidate-choice experiment. A pilot survey, implemented via Amazon Mechanical Turk, took place in March 2018. The appendix benchmarks our sample against demographic data from the US Census Bureau and partisan and attitudinal questions from the ANES.

<sup>7</sup>The four platforms on taxes, for instance, were "increase the state income tax on households earning over \$250,000 and increase the state corporate tax," "increase the state income tax on households earning over \$250,000," "cut the state income tax for all households," and "eliminate the state income tax. "

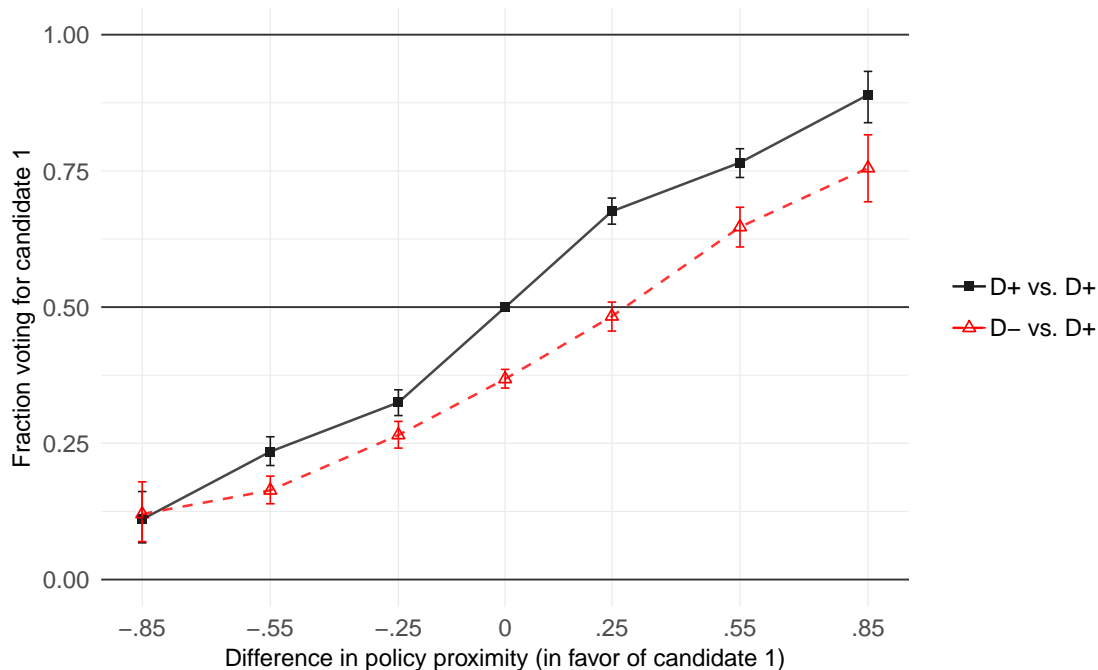


Figure 1: Fraction voting for candidate 1 by the difference in respondents’ policy proximity between candidate 1 and candidate 2

to compute the squared distance between a respondent’s ideal policy and each candidate’s platform for each of the candidate-choice scenarios that the respondents will face. The results that follow are robust to a range of alternative measures of policy proximity between respondents and candidates and account for the possibility that voters’ policy preferences may be ideologically incoherent (Converse, 1964) or multidimensional (Treier and Hillygus, 2009). We present and discuss these alternative measures in the appendix.

Figure 1 plots the fraction of respondents voting for candidate 1 as a function of the difference in policy proximity to the respondent between candidate 1 and candidate 2.<sup>8</sup> On the horizontal axis, a value of 0 refers to scenarios when the two candidates are equally proximate to the respondent, a value of 1 (−1) to scenarios when candidate 1 is a full scale

<sup>8</sup>“Voting” here refers to the respondents’ stated preference for one of the two candidates. We distinguish between respondents’ candidate preferences and their stated intent to turn out to vote in section 5.3.

closer to (further away from) the respondent than candidate 2 on both policy areas.<sup>9</sup> We treat the  $D^+$  vs.  $D^+$  scenario (black solid line), when both candidates adopt neutral democracy positions but differ across other attributes, as our control condition; we treat the  $D^-$  vs.  $D^+$  scenario (red dashed line) as our treatment condition. Vertical bars denote 95% confidence intervals.<sup>10</sup>

The  $D^+$  vs.  $D^+$  control scenario provides an initial plausibility check of our design. Consistent with our spatial framework, the closer candidate 1 is to a respondent’s ideal policies relative to candidate 2, the more likely the respondent votes for candidate 1. Specifically, the fraction of respondents voting for candidate 1 increases from 11% when candidate 1 is a full scale less proximate to the respondent than candidate 2 to 89% in the opposite case. A respondent’s proximity to each candidate’s policy platform is a strong predictor of her candidate choices.

Figure 1 also provides an initial estimate of whether and how much Americans value democracy. Because the only systematic difference between our control and treatment condition is candidate 1’s democracy position, we can interpret a change in the fraction of voters who support candidate 1 as a measure of the public’s ability to serve as a democratic check. This change amounts to a 11.81% decline in candidate 1’s vote share when he adopts an undemocratic position (CI: 10.64, 12.69). All else equal, a candidate who adopts an undemocratic position can expect a virtually certain electoral defeat.

Are Americans willing to trade off democratic principles in exchange for more appealing policies? Figure 1 allows us to address this question by partitioning our experimental

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<sup>9</sup>That is, policy proximity is the difference between a respondent’s average squared distance from each of the candidates’ two policy platforms,  $[\sum_k(x_{ik} - x_{2k})^2 - \sum_k(x_{ik} - x_{1k})^2] / 2$ , normalized to range between -1 and 1. The term  $k$  refers to the assigned economic and social policies.

<sup>10</sup>Because each respondent made multiple choices, estimates that treat all observations as independent may understate statistical uncertainty. We therefore compute all standard errors and confidence intervals using the block bootstrap, which accounts for dependence by resampling observations at the level of the respondent (see e.g. Bertrand et al., 2004). When they can be computed, we also report cluster-robust standard errors.



electorate into two politically consequential subsets of voters anticipated by our theory: “democracy first” and “policy first” voters. A majority of the former vote for the more democratic candidate even when doing so goes against their policy interests. These respondents lie in the interval at the center of Figure 1 between the intersection of the  $D^-$  vs.  $D^+$  line with the 0.5 horizontal line and its mirror image along that line. This interval corresponds to the values  $(-.25, .25)$  on the horizontal axis and its limits are the empirical counterpart of the two swing voters in our model. By contrast, voters to the left and right of this interval are “policy first” voters: a majority supports the more policy-wise proximate candidate, even if that candidate adopts an undemocratic position.

To get further insights into how respondents trade off democratic principles for policy interests, consider the following counterfactual: Start with the  $D^+$  vs.  $D^+$  control scenario in which both candidates adopt neutral democracy positions. Suppose that candidate 1 switches to an undemocratic position. How much more attractive would candidate 1’s policies have to become to compensate for his switching from  $D^+$  to  $D^-$ ? Figure 1 allows us to approximate this marginal rate of substitution between democratic principles and policy proximity. A respondent who is initially indifferent between the two candidates, needs to be compensated by candidate 1 by policies that are about .25 points more attractive on the policy proximity scale. Alarmingly, candidate 1 can accomplish this by shifting just one position closer to the respondent on a single policy area. Put differently, support for democracy is highly elastic with respect to voters’ policy preferences.

We gain additional insights into the robustness of support for democracy by examining differences in the severity with which respondents punish candidate 1 for adopting an undemocratic platform. The magnitude of this punishment, which is largest in the region immediately to right of 0 in Figure 1, is a combination of two factors: the baseline level of support for candidate 1 in each of the policy proximity subgroups and the rate at which

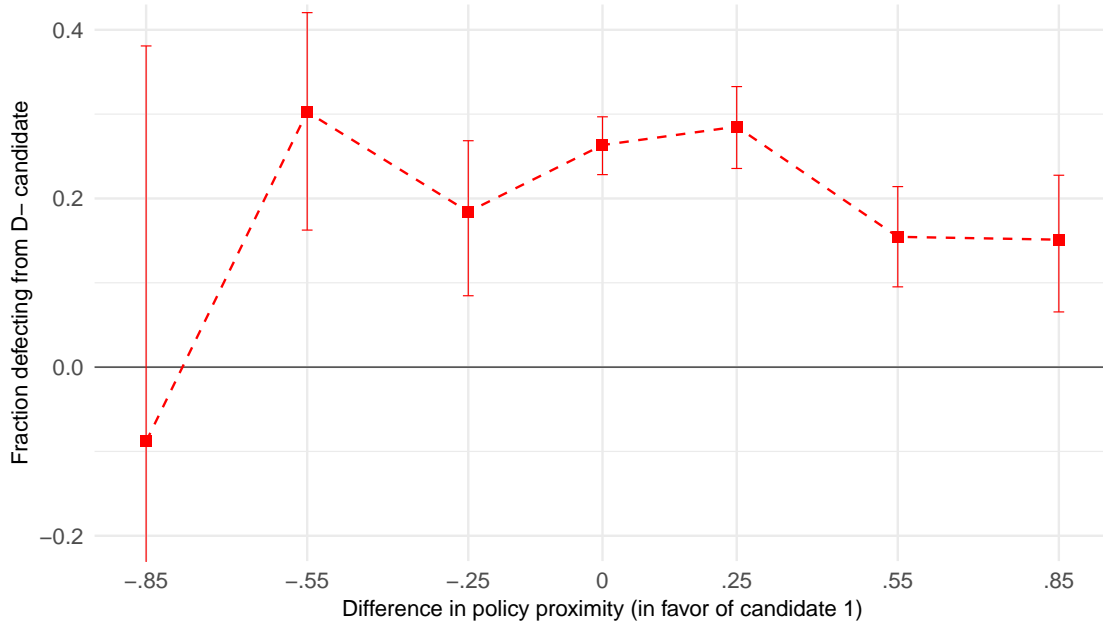


Figure 2: Fraction defecting from the less democratic candidate by the difference in respondents’ policy proximity to candidate 1 (vertical bars denote 95% confidence intervals, the blue dotted horizontal line plots the overall fraction defecting)

respondents in a subgroup defect from candidate 1 after he adopts an undemocratic position.<sup>11</sup> Figure 2 plots this defection rate. Consistent with our theoretical predictions, we see that “policy centrists” – respondents who are indifferent between the two candidates’ policies – defect from candidate 1 at a rate of about 30% and that this rate declines as we move toward “policy extremists” – respondents who have a strong policy-based preference for one of the two candidates.

These policy-based differences in respondents’ willingness to punish undemocratic behavior are consistent with our arguments about the pernicious consequences of polarization for democracy. Our representative sample allows us to simulate counterfactual electorates with increasing levels of policy polarization by varying the ratio of “policy centrists” to “policy extremists.” As suggested by Figure 2, an electorate consisting

<sup>11</sup>That is, the defection rate is  $\rho = \frac{\#_1(D^+ \text{ vs. } D^+) - \#_1(D^- \text{ vs. } D^+)}{\#_1(D^+ \text{ vs. } D^+)}$  where  $\#_1(T)$  refers to the number of respondents voting for candidate 1 in treatment condition  $T$ .

entirely of “policy centrists” would result in a resounding defeat of a candidate who would adopt an undemocratic platform. By contrast, an undemocratic candidate would have a 60-40 chance of prevailing in an electorate consisting entirely of the most extreme subgroups on each side of Figures 1 and 2.

## 4.2 Does Partisanship Trump Civic Virtue?

Are voters willing to prioritize democratic principles over partisan loyalties? To address this question, consider first contests between candidates from different parties. As in the previous section, denote by Rep  $D^+$  vs. Dem  $D^+$  the control condition when both candidates adopt a neutral democracy position and by Rep  $D^+$  vs. Dem  $D^-$  and Rep  $D^-$  vs. Dem  $D^+$  the treatment conditions in which the Republican or Democrat, respectively, adopts an undemocratic position.

Overall, undemocratic candidates are penalized by a loss of 9.70% (CI: 7.04%, 12.22%) and 11.28% (CI: 8.44%, 13.84%) of voters in the Rep  $D^+$  vs. Dem  $D^-$  and Rep  $D^-$  vs. Dem  $D^+$  scenarios, respectively. Both effects are statistically different from zero but not statistically different from each other (difference: 1.58%, CI: -2.90%, 6.19%). At the aggregate level, voters punish undemocratic behavior by both parties and they do so fairly evenly.

Are Americans willing to vote across party lines to punish a candidate for adopting an undemocratic position? To answer this question, consider that 62.69% of our respondents support their own party in the control condition. This number declines to 54.43% when a respondent’s co-partisan adopts an undemocratic position. Put differently, only 13.18% of our respondents are willing to defect from a co-partisan for violating democratic principles when the price is voting against their own party (CI: 9.03, 17.25).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>This figure is the defection rate  $\rho$  defined in the previous section. That is,  $13.18 = \frac{(62.69-54.43)}{63.69}$ . Among

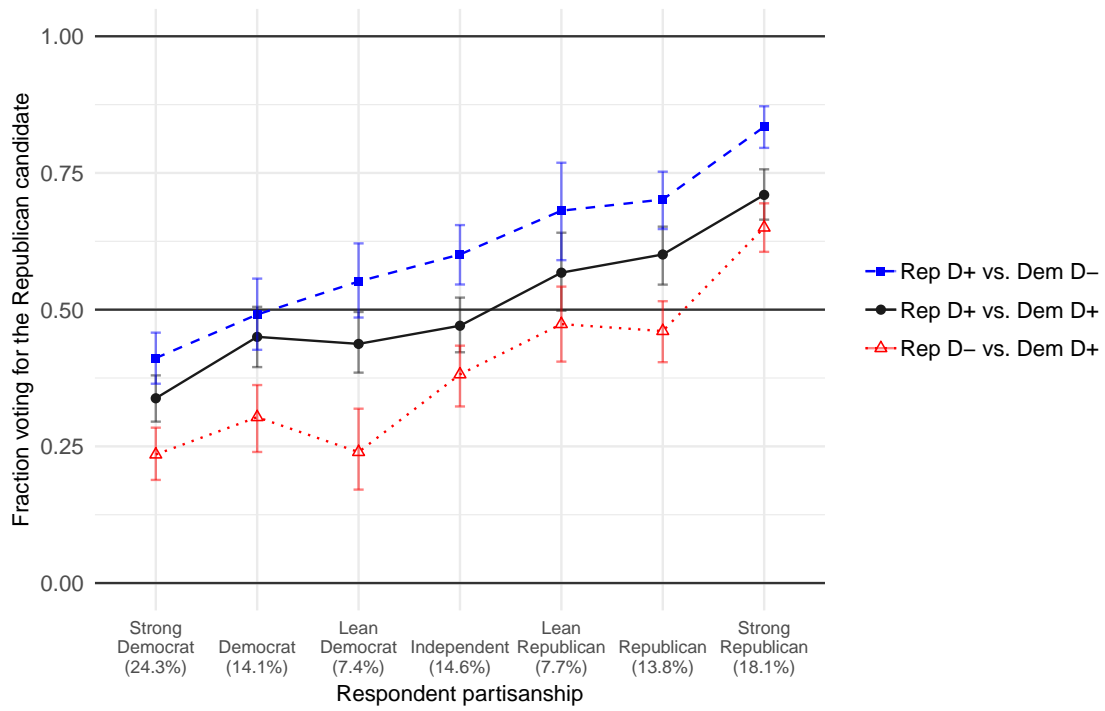


Figure 3: Different party contests: Fraction voting for a Republican Party candidate

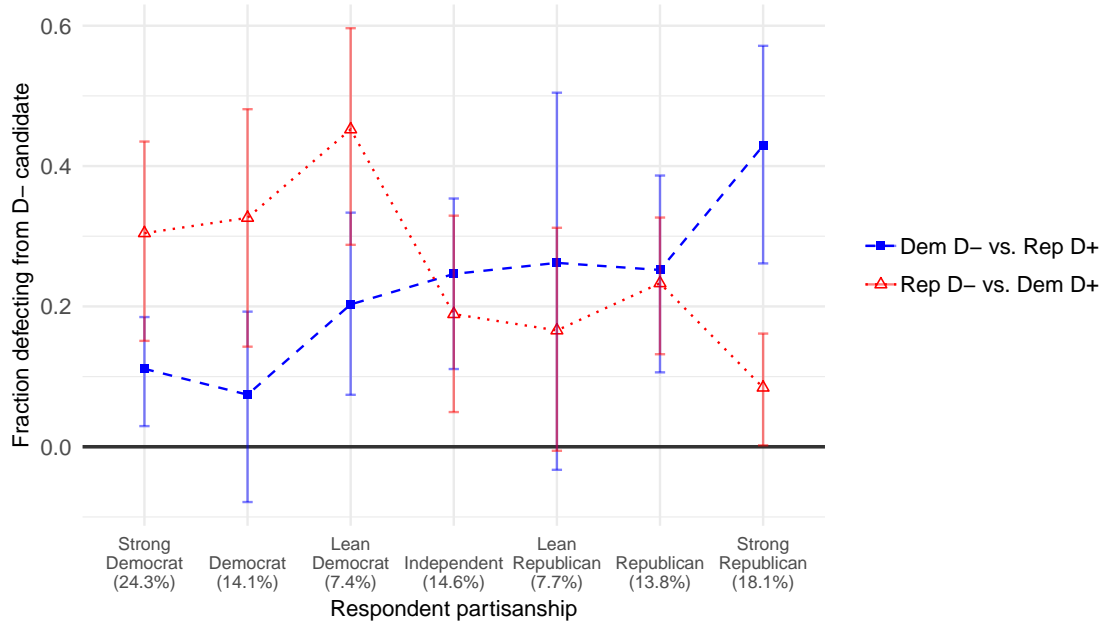


Figure 4: Different party contests: Fraction defecting from the less democratic candidate principles than cross party lines.

Strong partisans’ failure to punish their own party’s undemocratic positions is the result of two forces, both of which are consistent with our theory. First, strong partisans need to defect from undemocratic candidates at higher rates to compensate for their high baseline support for co-partisans in the control condition. Second, strong partisans do exactly the opposite: they are more lenient on violations of democratic principles by candidates from their party. Figure 4 shows this by plotting the fraction of respondents that defect from the  $D^-$  candidate by that candidate’s partisanship. Among both Democrats and Republicans, strong partisans are less than half as likely to punish undemocratic co-partisans as are independents and they punish undemocratic candidates from the other party three to four times as severely as those from their own party. Strong partisans are willing to punish their own for violating democratic principles, but they hold candidates from the other party to a much higher standard.

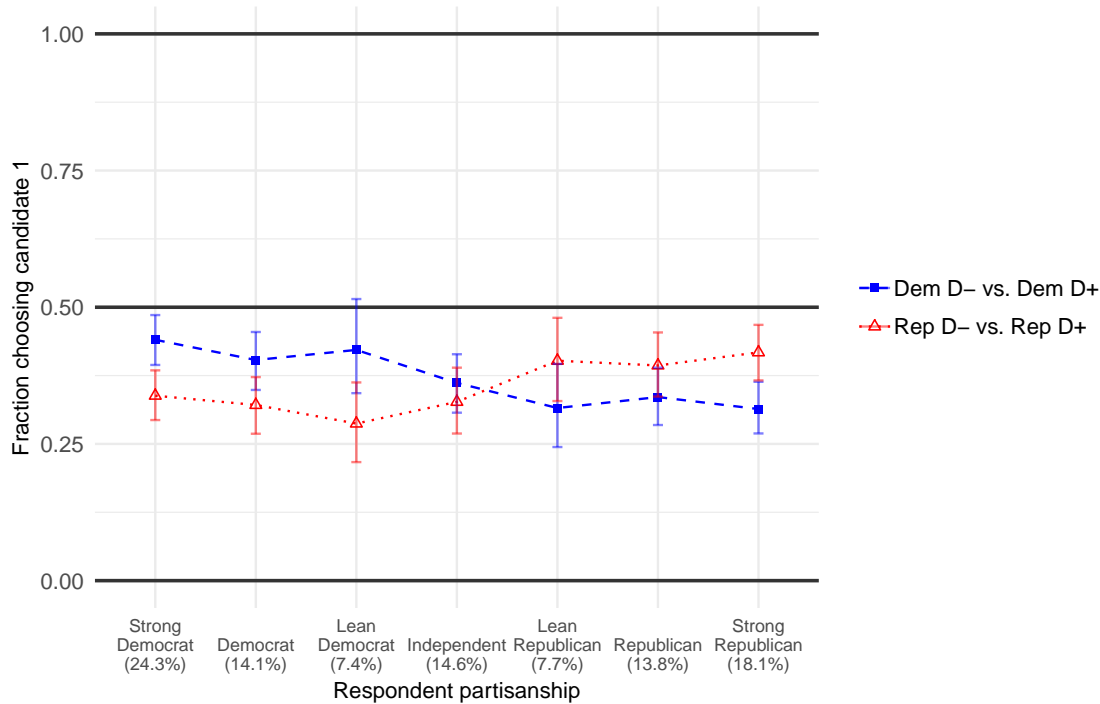


Figure 5: Same party contests: Fraction voting for candidate 1

This raises the question whether contests between candidates from the same party – primaries rather than general elections – are the most viable check on candidates who undermine democratic principles. Consistent with our theory, our respondents are more willing to punish undemocratic candidates in same-party than different-party contests: a candidate who adopts an undemocratic position is penalized by a loss of 13.34% and 10.48% of voters, respectively (difference: 2.86%, CI: 0.09%, 4.79%).

Figure 5 provides additional insights into this question. It plots the fraction of respondents voting for candidate 1 in contests between either two Democrats or two Republicans. When both candidates adopt a neutral democracy platform (either Dem  $D^+$  vs. Dem  $D^+$  or Rep  $D^+$  vs. Rep  $D^+$ ) that fraction is (by construction) 0.5. Now consider the punishment for a Democrat who adopts an undemocratic position (Dem  $D^-$  vs. Dem  $D^+$  in a blue dashed line): its severity is increasing as we move

rightward along the horizontal axis, away from partisan supporters and toward partisan opponents. The reverse holds when a Republican candidate adopts an undemocratic position (Rep  $D^-$  vs. Rep  $D^+$  in a red dotted line.) This occurs in spite of the fact that voters are choosing between candidates from same party. Put differently, voters employ a double standard even when the partisanship of the winning candidate is preordained!

In sum, the promise of primaries as a democratic check is undermined by partisan double standard. In same party contests, an undemocratic candidate's vote share declines by 16.98% among respondents from the other party but only by 8.16% among his co-partisans (difference: 9.32%, CI: 6.03%, 12.49%). Thus voters who would punish undemocratic candidates the most are typically precluded from participating in the primary in which they would actually do so.

These findings are consistent with our theoretical predictions about the relationship between partisan polarization and the electorate's willingness to punish candidates that violate democratic principles. Strong partisans defect from  $D^-$  candidates at lower rates than moderates and independents, and they do so because they are reluctant to punish their own. Paralleling our conclusions from the preceding section, an electorate consisting of only strong partisans would provide a weak check on candidates who violate democratic principles. Furthermore, in electorates with a large enough partisan imbalance – as in the majority of legislative districts in the United States – a candidate of the majority party can adopt a  $D^-$  position and get away with it. Precisely when the proper functioning of an electoral democratic check requires the defection of a large fraction of co-partisans, the latter are inclined to be forgiving.

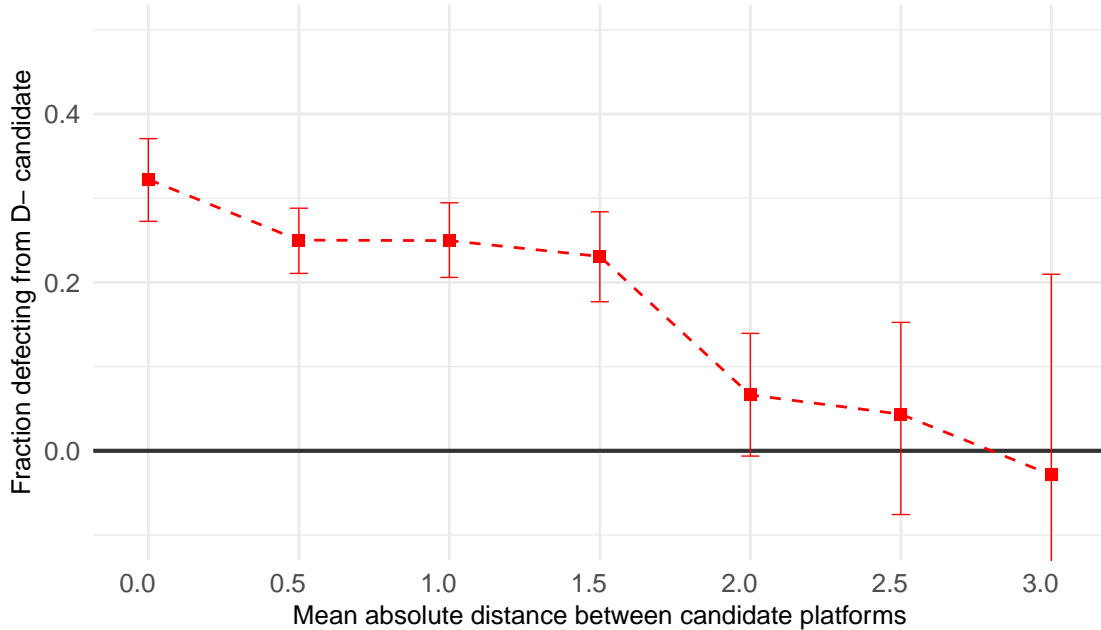


Figure 6: The effect of the mean absolute distance between the candidates’ two policy platforms on the fraction of respondents defecting from a  $D^-$  candidate

### 4.3 The Pernicious Consequences of Candidate Polarization

An important advantage of our research design is that it allows us to identify the consequences for democratic stability of two conceptually and empirically distinct type of polarization – the polarization of voters and the polarization of candidates. Because candidates’ policy platforms and partisanship were independently and randomly assigned, we can examine how candidate polarization affects voters’ ability to serve as a democratic check. Our model in section 3 implies that greater candidate polarization results in a greater share of voters who are willing to tolerate undemocratic behavior.<sup>13</sup> Crucially, in both the model and our experimental results, these consequences of candidate polarization are independent of voter polarization – they obtain even if we hold voter polarization fixed.

Above, our analysis of contests between candidates from the same versus different

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<sup>13</sup>This the effect of the term  $(x_{2k} - x_{1k})$  in the denominator in (3).



parties finds support for this prediction in terms of partisanship: we saw that respondents were less willing to punish undemocratic candidates in different-party than same-party contests. Figure 6 provides further support for this prediction by showing the consequences of polarization in candidates' policies. The horizontal axis plots the mean absolute distance between the candidates' two policy platforms;<sup>14</sup> the vertical axis plots the fraction of respondents defecting from a  $D^-$  candidate. We see that 44.9% of respondents defect from a  $D^-$  candidate when the two candidates' policies are identical (CI: 33.7%, 52.1%); the defection rate declines to levels that are statistically indistinguishable from 0 when both policies are as far apart as possible. Consistent with our theoretical framework, voters become more reluctant to punish candidates who violate democratic principles as candidates' policy platforms move further apart.

One potential downside of the independent experimental assignment of candidates' policy platforms and partisanship is limited external validity: it may result in candidates with unusual combinations of partisanship and policies (e.g. a Democrat who favors eliminating the state income tax.) We can account for this limitation by restricting our analysis to those candidate choice scenarios that better reflect the real-world alignment between policies and partisanship. Such a procedure in effect explores the consequences of another distinct conception of polarization: a greater ideological alignment between policies and partisanship.

Consistent with our theoretical arguments, a stronger alignment between policies and partisanship reduces punishment for candidates that violate democratic principles. Consider different party contests, but now disregarding those candidate choice scenarios in which Democratic Party candidates adopted the rightmost of the four possible policy positions and vice-versa for Republican Party candidates. A candidate who adopts an

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<sup>14</sup>Specifically, the mean absolute distance between the candidates' two policy platform is  $|\sum_k (x_{2k} - x_{1k})|/2$ , where the term  $k$  refers to the assigned economic and social policies.

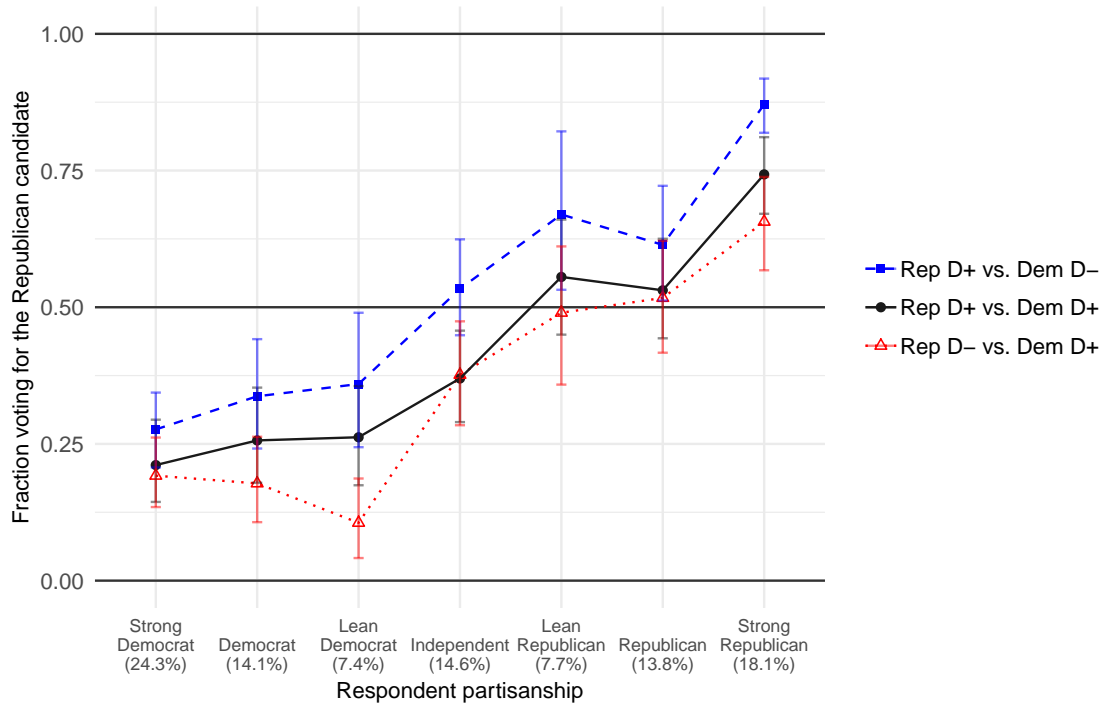


Figure 7: Different party contests when partisanship and policies ideologically align: Fraction voting for a Republican Party candidate

undemocratic position now loses 8.25% of voters compared to 10.43% when platforms and partisanship were independently assigned. Similarly, the share respondents willing to vote across party lines to punish a candidate for adopting an undemocratic position now declines from 14.34% to 12.06%. Figure 7 plots the analogue to Figure 3. Comparing the two, we see that no subset of partisans is now willing to vote across party lines in large enough numbers to defeat a candidate who adopts an undemocratic position.<sup>15</sup> All of these effects grow in magnitude when we impose even greater alignment on candidates' policies and partisanship. Consistent with our theoretical arguments, when candidate policy platforms and partisanship compound – just as they do in the real world – the viability of the public as a democratic check declines.

<sup>15</sup>Independent who lean Republican are the only subset estimated to defeat a co-partisan who adopts an undemocratic position, but this effect is statistically indistinguishable from 0.

## 4.4 Resisting the Menu of Manipulation<sup>16</sup>

When examining our respondents’ willingness to punish candidates that violate democratic principles, we have so far pooled all democracy positions into two groups, neutral and undemocratic positions. We now examine the differences in Americans’ willingness to tolerate the distinct ways in which the individual undemocratic positions violate democratic principles and interpret them in light of several benchmarks.

Figure 8 summarizes the effects of candidates’ democracy positions as well as any other attributes on a candidate’s vote share. The dots mark coefficient estimates from a linear model that regresses candidate choices on all experimentally manipulated attributes, with bars representing the associated 95% confidence intervals. (Dots without confidence intervals represent baseline categories.) Following [Hainmueller et al. \(2015\)](#), we interpret these coefficients as the expected change in a candidate’s vote share caused by the corresponding attribute, relative to the relevant baseline category and averaging over all other attribute levels.

Consider first the coefficients associated with the democratically neutral, “generic” positions. All seven are individually (and jointly) statistically indistinguishable from 0, implying that they do not affect a candidate’s vote share. This validates our design and interpretation of these attributes as not only democratically neutral but also more generically inconsequential.

Figure 8 also demonstrates a considerable variation in the effect of the individual undemocratic platforms on a candidate’s vote share. While all undemocratic platforms effect a candidate’s vote share negatively, the magnitude of that effect ranges from 7.8% to 14.2%. Respondents punish most severely candidates who want to prosecute journalists, close polling stations, and ignore court rulings. These undemocratic positions result in the

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<sup>16</sup>This subtitle paraphrases the title of [Schedler’s \(2002\)](#) seminal article.

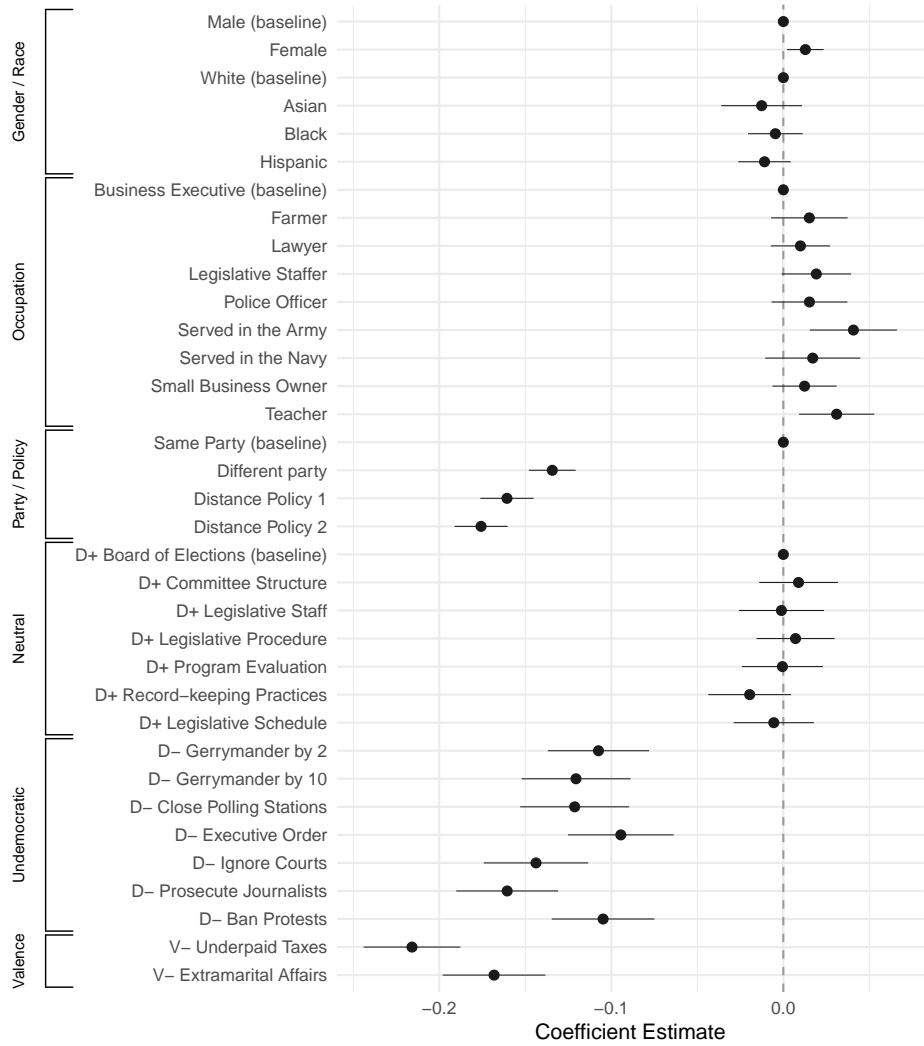


Figure 8: Effects of candidate attributes and democracy positions on a candidate's vote share. Dots represent coefficient estimates based on a linear regression model; bars represent 95% confidence intervals

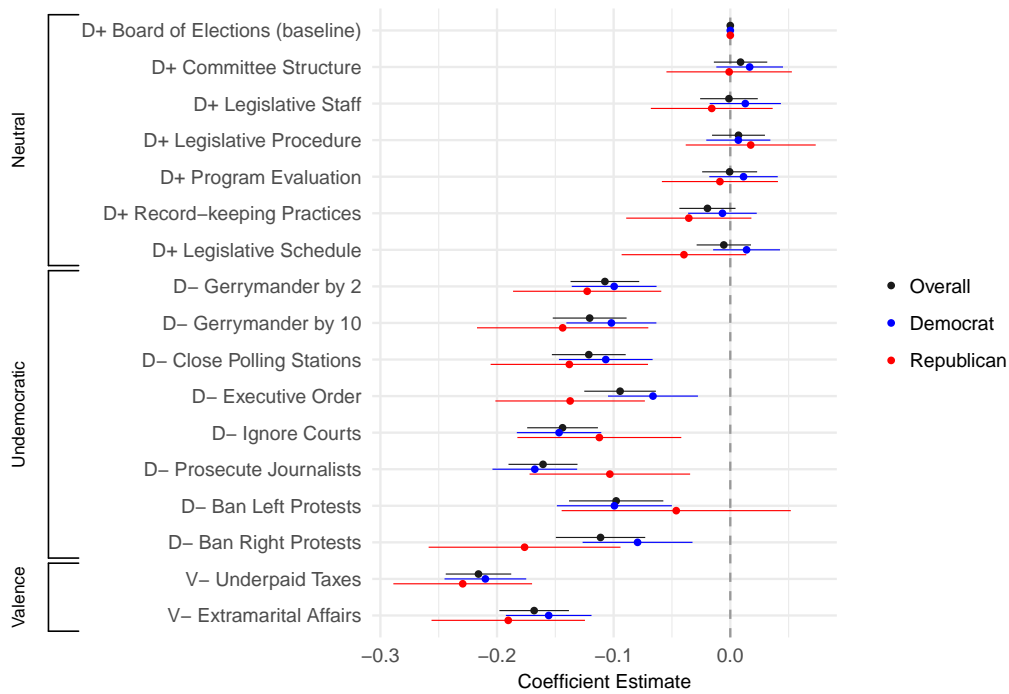


Figure 9: Effects of neutral, valence, and undemocratic positions on a candidate's vote share by respondents' partisanship. Dots represent coefficient estimates based on a linear regression model; bars represent 95% confidence intervals

defection of 12-14% voters who would have otherwise voted for that candidate.

Respondents are least sensitive to candidates who endorse gerrymandering (by 2 seats) and suggest that the governor ignore the legislature and rule by executive order. Figure 9 differentiates these estimates by respondents' partisanship. Consistent with our earlier findings, we see few difference between supporters of the two major parties.

To put the magnitude of these effects in context, compare the effect of these undemocratic positions to that of other positional and valence candidate attributes. Consistent with our discussion in sections 4.1 and 4.2, the two main positional attributes – a candidate's party and policy platforms – have a greater impact on a respondent's candidate choice than any of the undemocratic positions.

Of the attributes assigned in the core 11 of the total 16 candidate choices that our respondents made, the most naturally interpretable as valence are candidate age, years of experience, and profession. From among the nine professions, only military service comes close to being statistically significant but its effect is an order of magnitude smaller than that of any of the undemocratic positions. Due to space constraints, Figure 8 omits candidates' age and years of experience. With a few exceptions, effects of these attributes are also close to zero and not statistically significant.<sup>17</sup>

To help us further interpret the effect undemocratic positions, we included in 2 of the 16 choices that our respondents made two negative valence attributes intentionally *unrelated* to democracy. According to the first, the candidate “was convicted of underpaying federal income taxes;” according to the second, the candidate “was reported to have had multiple extramarital affairs.” Estimates associated with these two attributes appear at the bottom of Figure 8 and are labelled  $V^-$ . We see that, voters punish candidates for extramarital affairs and underpaying taxes *more severely* than they punish them for undermining democratic principles.

## 5 Extensions and Robustness Checks

### 5.1 Do Americans Know What Democracy Is (And Is Not)?<sup>18</sup>

One potential objection to our conclusions so far is that Americans may simply have a poor understanding of what democracy is or what it is not. In order to evaluate this objection, we included in a survey that preceded the candidate choice experiment a mix of democratic and undemocratic practices and asked each respondent to evaluate them. We

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<sup>17</sup>We present a complete set of results in the appendix.

<sup>18</sup>This subtitle paraphrases the title of [Schmitter and Karl's \(1991\)](#) seminal article.

display a subset of these in Figure 10 and the full set in the appendix.

To check that respondents understood that the specific practices that would later appear in our treatments were undemocratic without alerting respondents to our interest in those particular items, we embedded the treatment checks were included in a larger battery of democratic practices. All respondents were asked, “Countries around the world differ in how democratic they are. We sampled the following practices from around the world. How democratic do you think each one is?” For verification that respondents also understand what democracy *is*, we also included some pro-democratic practices in the “around the world” battery, as well as the “essential for democracy” battery from the World Values Survey.<sup>19</sup> A randomly selected half of our respondents were asked, “Many things are desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. On a scale from 1 to 10, how essential for democracy is each of the following things?” Respondents rated each statement on a 1-10 scale, where 1 means “not at all democratic” and 10 means “completely democratic.” Before computing the mean ratings, we rescaled the items to range from 0 to 1.

As Figure 10 shows, most Americans subscribe to the same liberal conception of democracy that political scientists do. The average rating is below .5 for each of the treatment check items, as well as the “essential to democracy” items that describe undemocratic practices (all labelled  $D^-$ ). Respondents are similarly capable of distinguishing democratic, undemocratic, and democratically-neutral practices in a battery of standard questions from the *World Values Survey*. Put differently, most of our respondents knew that they were voting for a less democratic candidate when they did so in our candidate-choice experiment.

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<sup>19</sup>For space reasons, we present the more-familiar “essential for democracy” questions here and leave the “around the world” questions not related to our treatment to the appendix.

*Treatment checks*

The president began ruling by executive order after legislators from opposition parties refused to cooperate with his administration. (D-)

The largest party redrew legislative districts in order to secure its control of the legislature for the next term. (D-)

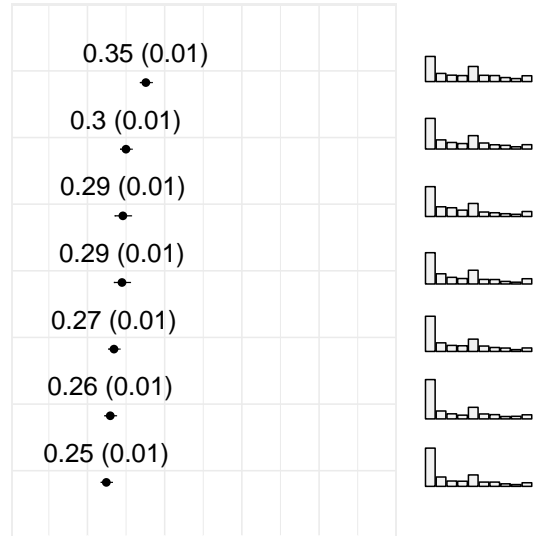
Far-right groups are banned from holding public rallies. (D-)

Far-left groups are banned from holding public rallies. (D-)

The government ignores unfavorable court rulings. (D-)

The government prosecutes journalists who criticize the president and refuse to reveal sources. (D-)

The government cut the number of polling stations in areas that support the opposition. (D-)



*Essential to democracy (World Values Survey)*

Women have the same rights as men. (D+)

People choose their leaders in free elections. (D+)

Civil rights protect people from state oppression. (D+)

People receive state aid for unemployment. (N)

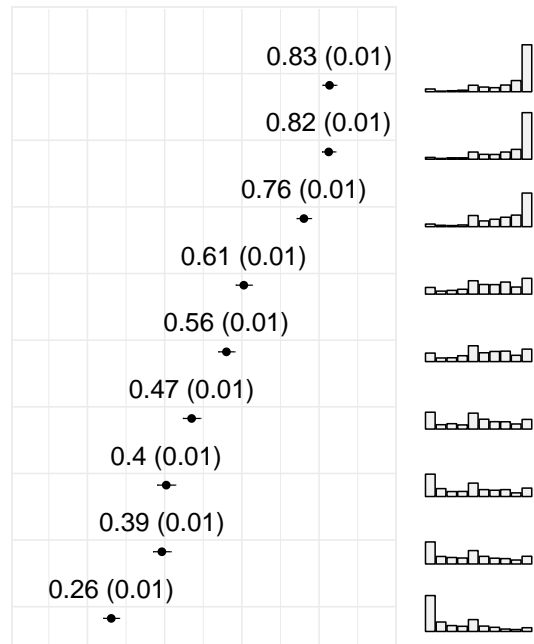
Governments tax the rich and subsidize the poor. (N)

People obey their rulers. (N)

The state makes people's incomes equal. (N)

The army takes over when government is incompetent. (D-)

Religious authorities ultimately interpret the laws. (D-)



Mean rating of statement

Figure 10: Respondents' rating of how democratic real-world practices are (mean ratings on 0-1 scale)



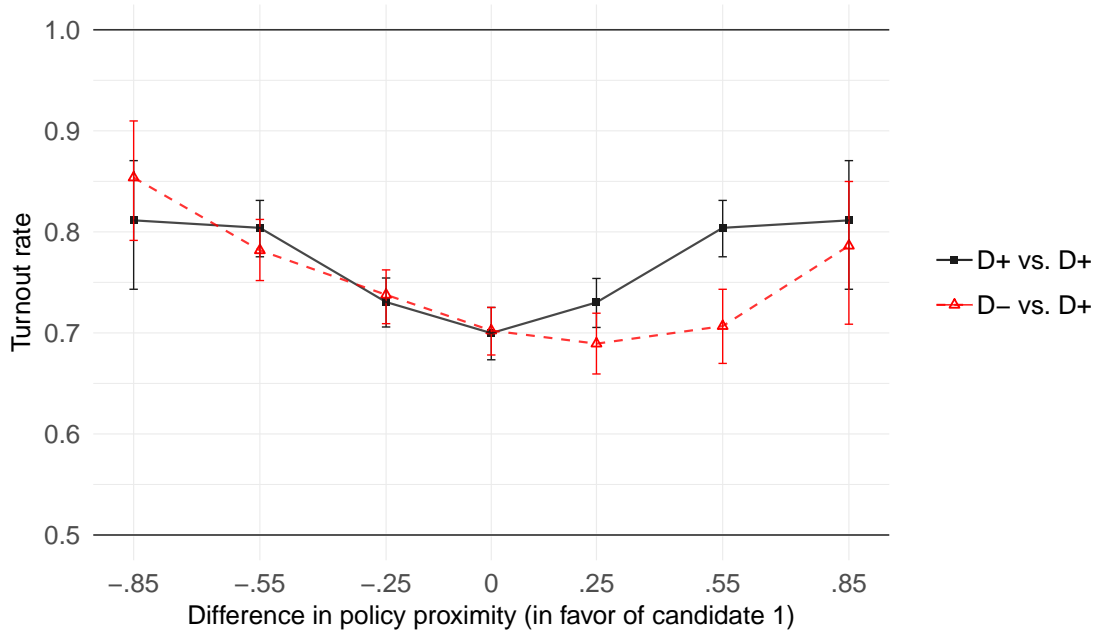


Figure 11: Turnout rates by the difference in candidate proximity to the respondent

## 5.2 Model-based Estimates of Support for Democracy

### 5.3 Exit versus Choice: Abstention as a Democratic Check

After seeing a profile of two candidates, each respondent was first asked which candidate they preferred and then whether they would vote in an election that pitted the two candidates against each other. In our discussion so far, we have focused on the first of these questions – the respondents’ vote choices. The second question allows us to examine the possibility that the primary manner by which voters punish candidates who adopt undemocratic positions is not defection but rather abstention. Figure 11 supports this hypothesis: The stronger a respondent’s preference for a candidate, the more likely she is to abstain rather than defect when that candidate adopts an undemocratic position.

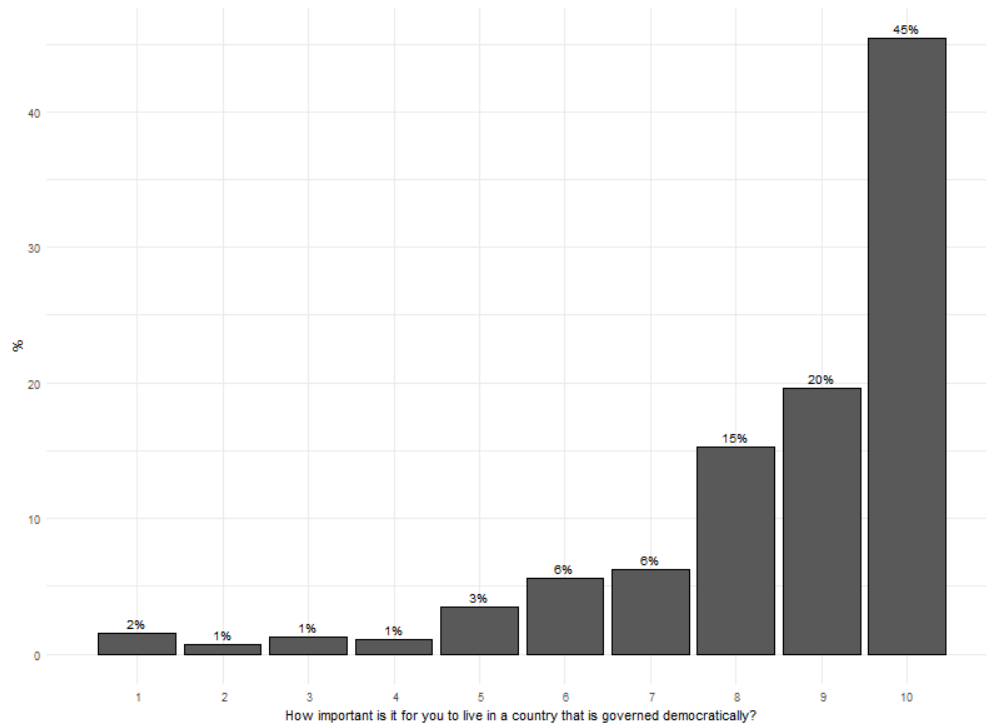


Figure 12: Conventionally measured support for democracy: “How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?” (1 stands for “not at all important” and 10 for “absolutely important”)

## 5.4 Support for Democracy or Cheap Talk?

Most of our knowledge about support for democracy in the United States and around the world is based on direct questions, as in “How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?” This approach invites socially desirable answers and – by design – fails to capture respondents’ willingness to trade off democratic values for other political ends. Our finding that only a fraction of Americans are willing to prioritize democratic values in their electoral choices raises questions about the behavioral relevance of these conventional measures.

Consider our respondents’ answers to the question mentioned above. When asked to rate the importance of living in a country that is governed democratically on scale from 1

to 10, where 1 stands for “not at all important” and 10 for “absolutely important,” more than 80% of our respondents answer 8-10 and more than 95% answer 5-10. The distribution of these answers is shown in Figure 12. The mean answer of 8.6 and the median of 9 are statistically indistinguishable from answers to the same question in the 6th (last) wave of the World Values Survey (2011).<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, in the different-party scenarios discussed in section 4.2, less than 15% of our respondents are willing to punish a co-partisan who endorses an undemocratic action by voting against their own party. Crucially, this fraction is about the same among the more than 80% of our respondents who rate the importance of “living in a country that is governed democratically” as between 8 and 10 on a 1 to 10 scale. In other words, conventional measures of support for democracy perform poorly as predictors of a respondent’s vote for the more democratic candidate in our candidate-choice experiment and mask a remarkable willingness of Americans to put partisanship ahead of democratic principles.

## 6 The 2017 Montana Natural Experiment

Depending on whether they voted on election day or by absentee ballot, voters in the 2017 special election for Montana’s single U.S. House seat saw two different races.<sup>21</sup> Both races pitted the Republican Greg Gianforte against the Democrat Rob Quist. Absentee voters, who in Montana make up about 70% of registered voters, saw a small-government Republican with business credentials compete against a former musician Democrat who

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<sup>20</sup>For a recent reassessment of the robustness of support for democracy in the United States and Europe that is based on such conventional measures, see the debate between [Alexander and Welzel \(2017\)](#), [Foa and Mounk \(2017\)](#), [Norris \(2017\)](#), and [Voeten \(2017\)](#).

<sup>21</sup>The special election was held to fill the U.S. House seat vacated by Ryan Zinke, who became the Secretary of the Interior in President Trump’s administration.

supported mainstream liberal positions. All three major newspapers in Montana initially endorsed the Republican Greg Gianforte.

Election day voters saw the same race with one crucial difference: on the eve of the election, Gianforte assaulted the *Guardian* reporter Ben Jacobs after he repeatedly questioned the candidate about his position on Obamacare repeal.<sup>22</sup> The attack dominated the news coverage that evening and led the three major newspapers in Montana to rescind their endorsement of Gianforte on the morning of election day. Gianforte nonetheless won by a 5.6% vote margin.

The timing of Gianforte’s assault offers a real-world, quasi-experimental opportunity to evaluate the theoretical framework in section 3 and to corroborate the experimental results in section 4. We adopt a difference-in-differences empirical strategy that compares the (relative) shift among absentee and election day voters for the Republican U.S. House candidate between the November 2016 general election and the May 2017 special election.<sup>23</sup> That is, we think of vote shifts among absentee voters as a control that reflects what would have happened if no voters observed the assault;<sup>24</sup> vote shifts among election day voters reflect the causal effect of the assault.<sup>25</sup> Even though absentee voters may be different from election day voters, those differences cancel out when we use each group as its own, pre-treatment benchmark.

In the context of our theory, we interpret the assault as a public signal about

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<sup>22</sup>See e.g. Martin, Jonathan. “Montana Republican Greg Gianforte, Charged With Assault, Awaits Fate in Vote.” *The New York Times*, May 24, 2017.

<sup>23</sup>On difference-in-differences estimation, see e.g. Angrist and Pischke (2009) and Bertrand et al. (2004).

<sup>24</sup>By the time of Gianforte’s assault, election officials had already received 92.5 percent of absentee ballots that would ultimately be counted. According to the Montana voter file, 276,854 absentee ballots were processed and accepted in the 2017 special election on May 25, 2017. Of these, 256,156 have a received date of May 24, 2017 or earlier. For our sample of precincts, these figures are 33,191 of 35,264 (94.1 percent).

<sup>25</sup>As the *Billings Gazette* wrote, “To the voters who have not voted yet, we simply urge you to evaluate each candidate very carefully and make the best choice. To those who have voted: Unfortunately, Montana does not allow those who voted early to reconsider and vote again. We’re one of the few states that does not. This would seem to be the best reason we should urge our state leaders to change that law.” The Billings Gazette Editorial Board, May 24, 2017.

Gianforte’s respect for the free press or – at minimum – as a negative valence signal about his fitness for office.<sup>26</sup> In turn, we expect voters to punish Gianforte for the attack, but crucially, we predict that the severity of that punishment will be decreasing in the strength of a precinct’s partisanship. In the context of Montana’s partisan makeup, this implies that the precinct-level decline in Gianforte’s vote share should be largest in moderate precincts and decreasing as the strength of the Republican Party in a precinct grows. This obtains because voters’ willingness to tolerate a co-partisans who violates democratic principles increases in the intensity of their partisanship.<sup>27</sup>

In order to investigate these predictions, we contacted election administrators in all of Montana’s 56 counties and identified the five counties that tallied absentee and election day ballots separately for each candidate in the years 2014, 2016, and 2017.<sup>28</sup> Figure 13 presents an initial exploration of data based on the 87 precincts in these five counties. Separately for each voting method, it plots the precinct-level differences in Republican vote shifts between November 2016 and May 2017 as a function of the 2016 Republican two-party vote share in the entire precinct. Given the absence of extreme Democratic precincts in our sample, we treat the latter as a measure of the intensity of a precinct’s partisanship.<sup>29</sup> Absentee vote shifts are shown as circles, election day vote shifts as

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<sup>26</sup>This is, in fact, how one major newspaper, *The Billings Gazette*, interpreted the assault in its election day editorial: “First, we hope that Republican party members and leaders call this for what it appears to be, an inexcusable act. We hope that partisan politics has not eroded our decency to the point where leaders and supporters feel the need to defend the indefensible. . . This incident is not Montana. It’s not America. It’s not who we are, and attacking literally – those with whom we disagree cannot be justified, tolerated or explained away. We must adopt zero tolerance for such behavior if freedom of expression means anything.” The Billings Gazette Editorial Board, May 24, 2017.

<sup>27</sup>We provide empirical support for this claim in the appendix, where we merge data from the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study with county-level results from the 2016 presidential election to show that Republicans in more Republican counties indeed tend to be stronger partisans, more conservative on the liberal-conservative scale, more conservative on issue position-based measures if ideology, and more disapproving of former President Barack Obama.

<sup>28</sup>Whether a county tallied absentee and election day ballots separately for each candidate appears to be primarily a function of the voting machine it uses. In the appendix, we use results from 2014 to examine the parallel trends assumption and construct placebo tests.

<sup>29</sup>The 2016 Republican twoparty vote share ranges from 31% to 91%, with just nine precincts below 50%

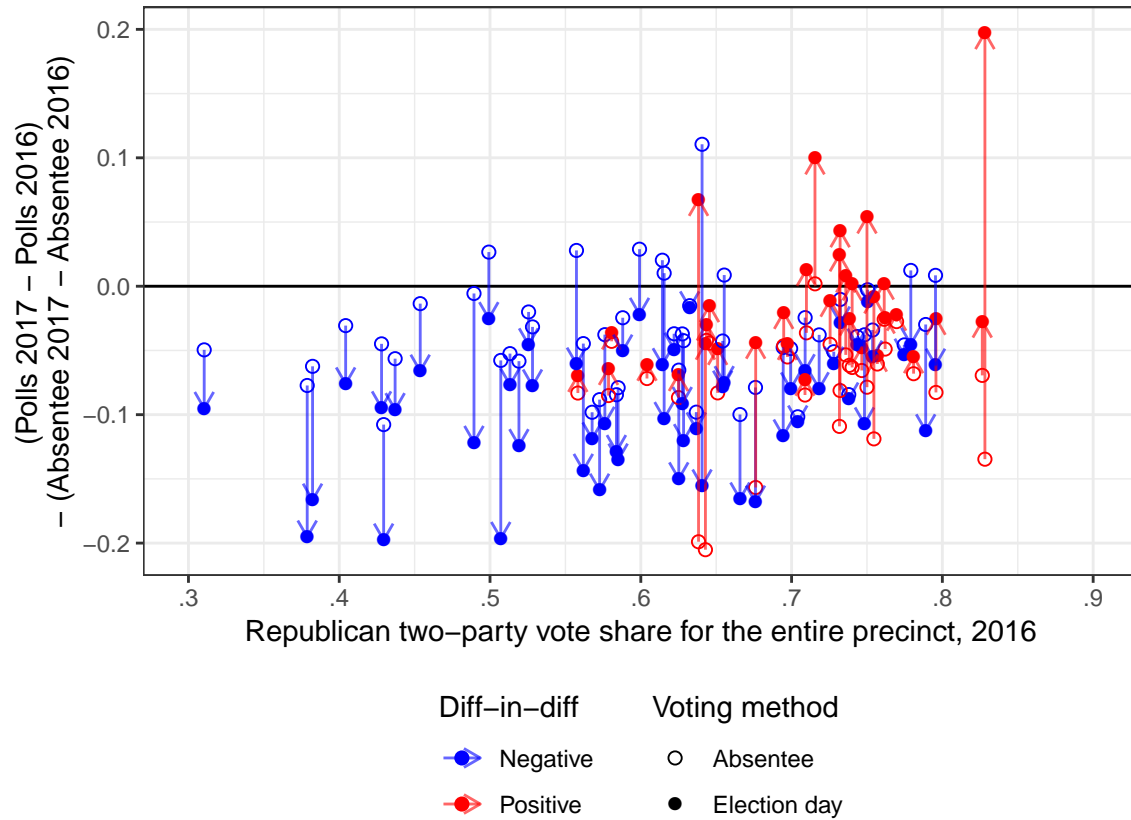


Figure 13: Differences in precinct-level vote shifts for the Republican U.S. House candidate in Montana between November 2016 and May 2017

diamonds; positive differences in vote shifts are highlighted by upward-facing red arrows, negative differences by downward-facing blue arrows. Consistent with our expectations, differences in vote shifts are negative and largest in moderate precincts; they decrease in magnitude and some even become positive as we move right along the horizontal axis.<sup>30</sup>

and three precincts below 40%.

<sup>30</sup>That is, some hardline Republican precincts appear to have rewarded rather than punish Gianforte's assault of the journalist.

To investigate this pattern more formally, we estimate the following linear models:

$$R_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 Y17_{it} + \beta_2 E_{it} + \beta_3 Y17_{it} E_{it} + \gamma \mathbf{X}_{it} + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (4)$$

$$R_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 Y17_{it} + \beta_2 E_{it} + \beta_3 Y17_{it} E_{it} + \beta_4 R_{i16} + \beta_5 Y17_{it} R_{i16} \\ + \beta_6 E_{it} R_{i16} + \beta_7 Y17_{it} E_{it} R_{i16} + \gamma \mathbf{X}_{it} + \epsilon_{it}. \quad (5)$$

Above,  $R_{it}$  is the Republican candidate’s vote share in precinct  $i$  in year  $t$ ,  $Y17_{it}$  is a dummy for the year 2017 (as opposed to 2016),  $E_{it}$  is a dummy for voting on election day (as opposed to absentee),  $R_{i16}$  is the Republican vote share for the entire precinct  $i$  in 2016, and  $\mathbf{X}_{it}$  is a vector of control variables. The latter includes the percentage of absentee voters, percentage living within the city limits, and mean age.<sup>31</sup>

Table 2 displays regression estimates for models in equations (4) and (5). Our main coefficients of interests are  $\beta_3$  and  $\beta_7$ . In equation (4),  $\beta_3$  refers to the overall effect of Gianforte’s assault on his 2017 election day vote share and is estimated to be 3.6% of the two-party vote share (column 1.) Thus, overall, Gianforte was punished by the loss of 3.6% election day voters. Montanans value a free press.

In equation (5), our main interest is in coefficient  $\beta_7$ , which captures how the assault’s effect varies with the 2016 Republican vote share in the entire precinct.<sup>32</sup> A positive  $\beta_7$  implies that Gianforte’s 2017 election day vote share is increasing in a precinct’s 2016 Republican vote share. This is indeed what we observe (column 2): the more Republican a precinct was in 2016, the more forgiving election day voters are of Gianforte’s assault in

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<sup>31</sup>These controls are based on the voter file and account for time-varying factors that may differentially affect absentee and election -day voters in the same precinct. In particular, there is a secular trend toward absentee voting in Montana: absentee ballots constituted 42.6% of all ballots cast in 2008, 47.2% in 2010, 58.9% in 2012, 60.2% in 2014, 65.4% in 2016, and 73.1% in 2017. Source: “[Absentee Turnout 2000-Present](#),” Montana Secretary of State, accessed on November 16, 2018.

<sup>32</sup>In equation (5),  $\beta_3$  estimates Gianforte’s election day vote share in a precinct with the 2016 Republican vote share of 0 (i.e.  $R_{i16} = 0$ ).

Table 2: Difference-in-differences estimates

		Dependent variable: Republican two-party vote share			
		Full sample		Restricted sample	
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
$\beta_1$	Year 2017	-0.048*** (0.008)	-0.024 (0.022)	-0.063*** (0.012)	-0.111*** (0.027)
$\beta_2$	Election day	0.087*** (0.023)	0.171*** (0.038)	0.128*** (0.032)	0.301*** (0.061)
$\beta_3$	2017 × Election day	-0.036* (0.014)	-0.237*** (0.041)	-0.042* (0.021)	-0.174** (0.055)
$\beta_7$	2017 × %R <sub>i16</sub> × Election day		0.313*** (0.066)		0.220** (0.085)
N		348	348	164	164
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		0.315	0.904	0.432	0.923
<i>Note:</i>		*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 Standard errors clustered by precinct			

2017. Columns 3 and 4 probe the robustness of these findings by restricting the sample to precincts most consistent with the parallel trends assumption.<sup>33</sup>

These findings are consistent with our theoretical framework and experimental findings: only moderate Republicans are willing to punish Gianforte for assaulting the journalist by either abstaining or voting for a Democrat; for strong partisans, partisan loyalty trumps valence considerations. Montanans value a free press, but not enough for most hardline Republicans to vote for a Democrat.

<sup>33</sup>These are precincts for which we can verify that the 2014 to 2016 difference-in-differences was less than 5%. This was the case for 42 out of 68 precincts for which we have data from the year 2014. See the appendix for details and further plausibility checks for key assumptions behind the difference-in-differences framework.



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