# Lawman versus Strongman: How Competing Rhetoric about Trump's Prosecution Affects Political Attitudes

Daniel Markovits,* Andrew O'Donohue[†][§]

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## Abstract

Prosecutions of political leaders may have double-edged effects in democracies. While prosecutions may turn public opinion against law-breaking politicians, legal interventions may also bolster support for the accused leader and encourage his supporters to seek retaliation. Crucially, while high profile prosecutions typically receive sufficient attention to overcome concerns about information and accountability, voters receive conflicting information about what such cases represent. Whereas legal officials defend them as democratic accountability, accused political leaders routinely denounce prosecutions as anti-democratic. To understand the effects of legal versus partisan messaging about prosecutions, we conducted a survey experiment with 3,000 self-IDed Republicans and Republican-leaning independents in which we randomized respondents to receive competing cues about the legitimacy of the Trump prosecutions. Drawing on literature about elite opinion leadership and perceptions of norm violations in the mass public, we pre-registered hypotheses relating to retaliatory support for democratic norms and political outcomes. While we find evidence that our competing messaging shifts beliefs about the prosecution there is little evidence in our full sample that beliefs about the Trump prosecution fuel support for democratic norm violations. Instead we find suggestive evidence regarding short-term political outcomes. Our Jack Smith treatment slightly reduces support for Trump in the Republican Primary. However, the prosecutor suffers a "shoot the messenger" effect: exposure to legal messaging dramatically reduces favorability toward the prosecutor among both moderates and conservatives.

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*PhD Candidate, Department of Political Science, Columbia University (`dbm2143@columbia.edu`)

[†]PhD Candidate, Department of Government, Harvard University (`aodonohue@g.harvard.edu`)

# 1 Introduction

In democracies worldwide, from Argentina, Brazil, and Italy to Israel, South Korea, and the United States, dozens of former presidents and prime ministers have faced criminal charges after leaving high office (Ahn and Benson, 2023). In the United States in particular, multiple prosecutions against Donald Trump have emerged as a key issue shaping the Republican primary and 2024 presidential election, as the former president seeks to turn the charges against him to his political advantage (Bender, 2023; Price and Riccardi, 2023). Crucially, citizens have received conflicting messages regarding the legitimacy of Trump's prosecutions, and these distinct framings of the prosecution may have far-reaching ramifications for public opinion, including citizens' support toward Trump, the prosecution, and democratic norms.

On the one hand, non-partisan legal officials, such as U.S. Special Counsel Jack Smith, have portrayed their prosecutions as upholding democratic norms by ensuring that all citizens, no matter how powerful, obey the rule of law. If this legal messaging is persuasive, then citizens may become more likely to endorse the prosecution and less likely to support the accused leader and acts of retaliation that violate democratic norms. On the other hand, many partisan elites, especially Donald Trump himself, have denounced the legal charges, with the former president characterizing the prosecution as "election interference" (Price and Riccardi, 2023) and prominent Republicans decrying the "weaponization" of the federal government (of Representatives, 2023). If this partisan messaging sways citizens, then we may observe a negative feedback loop in which prosecutions decrease support for legal accountability and only increase support for both the accused leader and actions that perpetuate a spiral of norm violations. Indeed, media coverage frequently suggests that Trump's indictments have only bolstered his popularity in the Republican presidential primary (Bender, 2023; Price and Riccardi, 2023), though scholarly research has challenged this claim (Barari et al., 2023).

To understand how competing messaging about the prosecution of Donald Trump affects public opinion, we conducted a survey experiment with approximately 3,000 U.S. citizens who identify as Republicans or independents. Our survey experiment randomly assigned participants into one of three conditions. First, in the *Placebo* condition, respondents received written, factual information about the existence of the prosecution concerning Trump's possession of classified government documents and then watched a one-minute video on a topic unrelated to Trump's prosecution. Second, in the *Legal Messaging* treatment condition, respondents read the same factual information and then received legal messaging by watching a one-minute video clip in which the federal prosecutor Jack Smith presents his case to the public at a press conference. Finally, in the *Partisan Messaging* treatment condition,

respondents read the same factual information and then received partisan messaging by viewing a one-minute video clip in which Trump stridently denounced the prosecution.

Our results reveal three core findings. First, legal messaging from the prosecutor slightly increases respondents' perception that the prosecution is apolitical and democratic; interestingly, however, the facts of the case are largely irrelevant to respondents' perceptions of whether the prosecution is normatively justified. Second, legal messaging sharply reduces support for the prosecutor but also decreases intention of voting for Trump among political moderates. Finally, and reassuringly for U.S. democracy, neither the legal nor partisan treatments undermines respondents' support for democratic norms or increases affective polarization. Overall, these findings provide evidence that legal messaging about Trump's prosecution can persuade political moderates without generating polarization or public support for retaliation; the main price of legal messaging is borne by the prosecutor himself.

## 2 Literature Review: Legal Interventions, Elite Messaging, and Democratic Norms

Our research synthesizes and engages with three literatures on the role of legal institutions in protecting democracy, the effect of elite messaging on public opinion, and the sources of public support for democratic norms.

First, engaging with research on the effects of "lawfare" (Feierherd, Gonzalez-Ocantos and Tuñón, 2023) and of "militant democracy" (Loewenstein, 1937a,b; Capoccia, 2013), our research provides experimental, micro-level evidence that illuminates how rule-of-law institutions affect public opinion during episodes of democratic erosion. In existing research on judicial politics, both in the United States (Dahl, 1957; Casillas, Enns and Wohlfarth, 2011) and other democracies (Helmke, 2005; Vanberg, 2005; Krehbiel, 2021), scholars typically posit that the behavior of legal institutions is endogenous to public opinion. Following work by Caldeira (1987), Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. (2023), and O'Donohue (2023), our argument turns this research on its head by arguing that public opinion may be endogenous to the behavior of legal institutions.

Specifically, our research turns the attention in this literature from the behavior of legal institutions to the effects of legal interventions on public opinion. Whereas Staton (2022) posit that independent legal institutions may limit democratic erosion by moderating inter-elite conflict, our research thus suggests that these institutions may also affect mass attitudes. Finally, whereas existing research uses country-level case studies to understand

how rule-of-law institutions may affect democratic backsliding (Ginsburg and Huq, 2018; Laebens and Lührmann, 2021), our survey provides experimental, micro-level evidence.

We contend that the public opinion effects of the Trump prosecution are especially important in the U.S. context. Unlike in many democracies, such as Brazil or Germany (Capoccia, 2013), courts in the United States lack clear authority to bar even convicted and jailed politicians from seeking high office. U.S. legal scholars debate, and the U.S. Supreme Court has yet to decide, whether the U.S. Constitution, in particular Section Three of the Fourteenth Amendment, bans Trump from high office (Baude and Paulsen, 2023; Ginsburg, Huq and Landau, 2021). Given the uncertain capacity of the U.S. legal system to engage in "militant democracy" (Loewenstein, 1937$a$,$b$), perhaps the only way for courts to stymie candidates who threaten to erode democracy is by turning public opinion against them.

Second, by exposing participants to legal and non-partisan messaging, our research contributes to scholarship on the effects of elite messaging on public opinion. We posit that perceptions of Trump's prosecution are a complicated area of public opinion, which combines specific beliefs about the underlying facts of the case with broader attitudes toward Trump and legal institutions. That is, perceptions of Trump's prosecution as partisan may be based on a combination of beliefs about specific facts (e.g., whether Trump possessed classified documents) and about institutions (e.g., whether the Department of Justice is under partisan control). We note that factual beliefs can have downstream consequences for trust in institutions, as work by Clayton et al. (2021) on election fraud claims suggests. Existing scholarship also shows that Trump exercises important persuasive power over Republican voters (Barber and Pope, 2019). We seek to uncover if these dynamics and similar findings about the contingent effectiveness of factual corrections (Bailard, Porter and Gross, 2022; Bowler, Carreras and Merolla, 2022; Berlinski et al., 2023) will hold in a context of non-factual persuasion and high stakes for the credibility of the justice system. Crucially, like perceptions of electoral malfeasance in 2020, beliefs about whether Trump's prosecution is politically motivated matter because these factual beliefs may shape citizens' perceptions about which actors are behaving democratically. If citizens believe that Trump's prosecution is politically motivated, then they may believe that the prosecutor, not Trump, is transgressing democratic norms.

Finally, engaging with cutting-edge research on "democratic norms" and norm violations (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018), we examine when and why prosecutions of political leaders may undermine democratic norms by generating public support for retaliation or escalation. Existing literature offers two key stylized facts about public support for democratic norms

and its role in democratic backsliding. First is an empirical finding that meta-perceptions of opponents' support for norm violations influence respondents' willingness to give anti-democratic survey responses, a finding that holds in observational data (Pasek et al., 2022) and in survey experiments on samples of the mass public (Braley et al., 2023) and political elites (Druckman, 2022). For instance, when respondents are informed that their political opponents support gerrymandering, they become more likely to condone such behaviors by their own party. Second is a qualitative and formal theoretical description of democratic backsliding as a series of escalating, tit-for-tat norm violations at the elite level (Helmke, Kroeger and Paine, 2022), analogous to a spiral equilibrium in which cooperation in an iterated prisoner's dilemma breaks down.

Our research seeks to fill three gaps in this literature on democratic norms and norm violations. First, we examine whether perceptions of norm-violating *behavior* increase citizens' support for anti-democratic actions, in the same way that perceptions about the anti-democratic *beliefs* of opposing partisans do (Braley et al., 2023).[1] We consider this to be an important extension of the growing literature on meta-perceptions.

Furthermore, an unanswered question in existing literature is the extent to which spirals of violating democratic norms extend beyond the substantive area of the initial norm violation. For example, in judicial politics in the United States, the retaliatory spiral of norm violations has been confined to a delimited issue area. That is, changes to judicial confirmation rules in the U.S. Senate have prompted retaliation that is substantively similar. After the Democratic party eliminated the filibuster for lower court nominations of judges, the Republican party responded by eliminating the filibuster for Supreme Court nominations. However, we do not know, given existing research, whether citizens may respond to violations of specific norms by endorsing retaliation in substantively unrelated areas. The answer to this question has important implications for whether norm-breaking behavior can be confined to delimited areas–or whether public backlash to an initial norm violation enables a broader deterioration in democratic norms and a spiral of escalating norm violations.

Finally, prior research on spirals of norm violations, such as Lenz et al 2022 and Pasek et al 2022, use survey vignettes which present explicit norm violations such as ignoring unfavorable court rulings and reducing polling places in out-party areas. In the real world however it is not new information about explicitly anti-democratic behaviors that might fuel spirals but rather alternative framings of highly salient behaviors as either democratic or not (because parties will always defend their actions on normative grounds). This gives us a more

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[1]We might think of this as the intensive versus extensive extent of support for retaliatory norm violations.

externally valid test of how anti-democratic spirals are likely to form.

# 3    Experimental Design

To test the public opinion effects of combating framings of Donald Trump's prosecution, we conducted a survey experiment in the United States using an online survey research platform, an approach shown to be appropriate for social science survey research (Coppock and McClellan, 2019). The intervention was implemented by Cint, a U.S. survey firm with extensive experience conducting survey experiments for academic purposes.[2] The research was approved by the Harvard University-Area Committee on the Use of Human Subjects under IRB Protocol #23-1041, as well as by Columbia University's IRB under Protocol AAAU8632. Our experimental design and hypotheses were pre-registered prior to our collection of data (Markovits and O'Donohue, 2023).

The target sample for our survey experiment was adult U.S. citizens who identify as Republicans or independents. We chose to sample only Republican or independent respondents for both empirical and theoretical reasons. Empirically, we think that the most interesting substantive effects will be among Republican and independent voters, as we are interested in understanding how prosecuting Trump may further consolidate support for him and encourage retaliatory action by the Republican party. We follow Bartels (2020) in sampling only Republicans for questions related to democratic norm violations. Theoretically, our question of interest is how such prosecutions may increase support for Donald Trump and for retaliatory violations of democratic norms. To understand how political prosecutions may increase support for retaliation among Democrats, we would need to look at an alternative set of events, such as the prosecution of Hunter Biden.

## 3.1    Treatment Conditions

Our survey randomly assigned respondents to one of three conditions of roughly equal size using the built-in randomization process in the survey software Qualtrics. In the *Placebo* condition, respondents received a brief, factual statement with information about the federal criminal charges former President Trump faces regarding his possession of classified documents. The text of the control statement is: "As you may know, Donald Trump has been indicted by a federal grand jury on charges related to his handling of classified documents after he left

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[2]Cint is the re-branded name of the site formerly known as Lucid.

office as president." After reading this factual statement, respondents viewed a a one-minute video that was unrelated to Trump's prosecution about the valuations of artificial intelligence (AI) companies.[3] We chose this placebo video because it is orthogonal to the topic of the survey. The full text of the statements in the placebo video is included in the Appendix.

Next, in the *Legal Messaging* condition, respondents read the same brief, factual information about the federal criminal charges, and they then viewed a one-minute video clip in which U.S. Special Counsel Jack Smith delivered remarks to explain the federal criminal charges filed against former president Trump.[4] In his statement, the prosecutor emphasizes the prosecution's procedural legitimacy and defends the prosecution as upholding the rule of law. Smith argues: "We have one set of laws in this country, and they apply to everyone. Applying those laws, collecting facts, that's what determines the outcome of an investigation." The full text of Smith's statement is included in the Appendix.

Finally, in the *Partisan Messaging* condition, respondents read the same factual information about Trump's prosecution and will watched a one-minute video clip in which former President Trump delivered remarks following his court appearance in Miami, Florida, where he pleaded not guilty to 37 federal charges relating to retention of classified documents after leaving office.[5] In his strident and vitriolic speech, Trump argued that the prosecution was unjustified and anti-democratic. Trump stated: "Today we witnessed the most evil and heinous abuse of power in the history of our country. A very sad thing to watch—a corrupt sitting president had his top political opponent arrested on fake and fabricated charges of which he and numerous other presidents would be guilty, right in the middle of a presidential election, in which he is losing very badly. This is called election interference and yet another attempt to rig and steal a presidential election. More importantly, it's a political persecution like something straight out of a fascist or communist nation." The full text of Trump's statement is included in the Appendix.

The videos in our treatment are comparable in certain ways, though not in others. To begin, in all three conditions, the videos come from the same news source, CNBC. We chose CNBC as the media outlet for our treatment because, unlike Fox or MSNBC, it is not widely known for an association with either political party. In all three conditions, the videos in both treatment conditions are also identical in length, at 1 minute and 9 seconds. Thus, the treatments aim to hold constant both the news source and length of the treatment. A further similarity is that both treatment videos are from press conferences that Trump and Smith

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[3]The specific clip will consist of 0:00-1:09 from this video.
[4]The specific clip will consist of 0:51-1:20 from this video.
[5]The specific clip will consist of 3:18-4:27 from this video.

held immediately after Trump's indictment.

However, our goal is not to find identical videos of Trump and Smith but rather to capture an ecologically valid representation of what political rhetoric from each figure looks like. In Max Weber's classic formulation, Smith and Trump make claims to very different types of authority: rational-legal versus charismatic (Weber, 2004). Smith's statement is a staid press conference, a textbook example of restrained, lawyerly speech without the cheers of a political audience. By contrast, Trump's statement, held in the style of a campaign rally, is a full-throated defense of his position, met with cheers from a crowd. These videos thus represent the different types of messages and appeals that legal versus partisan officials may offer to persuade the public.

## 3.2 Dependent Variables

Following the treatments, the survey instrument elicited respondents' attitudes regarding the prosecution, political leaders and institutions, democratic norms, and affective polarization.

To begin, we asked three questions about respondents' attitudes towards the prosecution as well as an open-ended question asking respondents to share their views of the prosecution. Questions about support for the prosecution measured both factual and normative assessments of the prosecution. Specifically, we asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the following three statements about the prosecution:

1. Prosecutors have claimed that Donald Trump kept classified documents that he should have returned, including sensitive military documents. How likely do think this claim is to be true?

2. Do you agree or disagree: The prosecution of Donald Trump is politically motivated.

3. Do you agree or disagree: The prosecution of Donald Trump is a violation of democratic norms.

Next, we asked about voting intention in the Republican primary, favorability toward Trump, and attitudes toward the prosecutor, Jack Smith. We measured voting intention in the Republican primary by asking respondents, "How likely are you to vote for Donald Trump in the 2024 Republican primary?". We measured respondents favorability toward Trump by asking, "How do you feel about Donald Trump?". Finally, we measured post-treatment attitudes toward the prosecutor by asking, "Overall, do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Jack Smith (photo below)?"

Finally, we asked about affective polarization and support for democratic norms. We measured affective polarization using a standard feeling thermometer, in which we asked respondents to rate how they felt about the Democratic party and Republican party on a scale ranging from 0 (unfavorable) to 100 (favorable). We then measure respondents' support for democratic norms and for retaliation against the prosecution by asking the following six questions. The first three questions (items 1-3) ask about support for "direct norm violations," defined as direct retaliation related to the issue area of the prosecution, whereas the final three questions (items 4-6) ask about "indirect norm violations," defined as indirect retaliation in areas unrelated to the prosecution.

1. Do you agree or disagree: If a Republican is elected president, the president should fire the prosecutors who brought criminal charges against Donald Trump.

2. Do you agree or disagree: If a Republican is elected president, the president should bring the Department of Justice and FBI under direct presidential control.

3. Do you agree or disagree: If a Republican is elected president, the president should open criminal investigations into the behavior of Democrats like Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer.

4. Do you agree or disagree: When a Republican candidate questions the outcome of an election, other Republicans should be more loyal to the Republican party than to election rules and the constitution.

5. Do you agree or disagree: The government should be able to censor media sources that spend more time attacking Republicans than Democrats.

6. Do you agree or disagree: The stakes of politics have become so high that violence is necessary to prevent our opponents from destroying America.

The following section presents our results for each of these dependent variables.

# 4 Results

Our results reveal three core findings regarding respondents' support for the prosecution, attitudes toward the prosecutor and former President Trump, and support for democratic norms and levels of affective polarization. Below are our results for our main model specifications. All models include our pre-registered vector of covariates. Coefficient plots are available in Appendix Figure 4.

## 4.1 Legal Messaging Increases Support for the Prosecution (but Facts Don't Matter)

We first tested whether legal and partisan messaging affected respondents' support for the prosecution by asking three questions that measured respondents' factual and normative assessments of the prosecution. First, we asked respondents whether they thought that the prosecutors' claim "that Donald Trump kept classified documents that he should have returned" was true. The variable *Factually True* is coded such that an increase in this variable indicates greater agreement that the prosecutors' claim is true. Second, we asked respondents whether they thought the prosecution was "politically motivated." An increase in the variable *Prosecution Apolitical* indicates that respondents viewed the prosecution as more apolitical and less politically motivated. Finally, we asked respondents whether they viewed the prosecution as "a violation of democratic norms." An increase in the variable *Prosecution Democratic* indicates that respondents regarded the prosecution as more consistent with democratic norms.

In Table **??**, we find that although legal messaging has no effect on whether respondents view the charges as factually true, the prosecutor's rhetoric increases perceptions of the prosecution as apolitical and consistent with democratic norms. This intriguing finding suggests that respondents' factual judgments of the case are partially separate from their normative judgments. Indeed, the prosecutor's rhetoric changed minds not by persuading respondents of the facts but by convincing them that the prosecution was being conducted in an apolitical, democratic manner. In Table 9 in the Appendix, we demonstrate that this increase in views of the prosecution as apolitical and democratic is driven by respondents who are politically moderate (i.e., who identify as "Slightly Conservative" or more liberal when asked about their political ideology).

Conversely, we find that although partisan messaging from Trump did not affect respondents' perceptions of the prosecution as apolitical or democratic, Trump's rhetoric

Table 1: Legal Messaging Increases Perceptions of the Prosecution as Apolitical and Democratic

| | Dependent variable: | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Factually True | Prosecution Apolitical | Prosecution Democratic |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Smith Treatment | −0.071 | 0.109** | 0.123** |
| | (0.054) | (0.051) | (0.053) |
| Trump Treatment | 0.135** | 0.035 | −0.042 |
| | (0.054) | (0.051) | (0.052) |
| Lean R | −0.073 | −0.215*** | −0.024 |
| | (0.056) | (0.052) | (0.054) |
| Solid R | −0.189*** | −0.195*** | −0.238*** |
| | (0.063) | (0.059) | (0.061) |
| College Educated | 0.204*** | −0.064 | −0.007 |
| | (0.045) | (0.042) | (0.044) |
| Trump Favorability | −0.702*** | −0.752*** | −0.864*** |
| | (0.048) | (0.045) | (0.047) |
| Percieve DOJ | 0.137*** | −0.261*** | −0.300*** |
| | (0.048) | (0.046) | (0.047) |
| Male | 0.127*** | −0.023 | −0.082* |
| | (0.047) | (0.044) | (0.046) |
| Age | −0.004*** | −0.007*** | −0.008*** |
| | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.001) |
| Constant | 3.445*** | 3.059*** | 3.548*** |
| | (0.082) | (0.077) | (0.080) |
| Observations | 2,862 | 2,862 | 2,862 |
| Adjusted R$^2$ | 0.099 | 0.138 | 0.172 |

*Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

*increased* respondents' perception that the prosecutors' charges were factually true. This interesting finding is consistent with Trump's own strategy in attacking the prosecution against him: Trump has not sought to deny that he possessed classified documents but rather to besmirch the motives behind the prosecution. Indeed, in the video of Trump that respondents watched in the partisan treatment group, the former president implicitly admits that he retained classified documents when he argues that he was only taking actions "of which [President Biden] and numerous other presidents would be guilty."

Thus, we suggest that the battle of political messaging over Trump's prosecution is largely being fought over the prosecution's motivations, rather than the facts of the case. Crucially, we find that official legal messaging can marginally increase citizens' faith that the prosecution is apolitical and democratic among political moderates.

## 4.2 Legal Messaging Reduces Support for the Prosecutor but Decreases Trump Voting Intention among Moderates

We next analyzed how legal and partisan messaging affected respondents' self-reported likelihood of voting for Trump in the Republican primaries; their attitudes toward the prosecutor, Jack Smith; their attitudes toward the prosecution, as measured by an additive index of the three variables assessing factual and normative judgments of the prosecution; and their perception of the Department of Justice as non-partisan.

Our core finding, as shown in Table **??**, is that exposure to legal messaging from Jack Smith clearly reduced respondents' post-treatment approval of the prosecutor. This finding is negative and significant at the 99% confidence level. Following John, Blunden and Liu (2019), we describe this result as a "shoot the messenger" effect. Remarkably, however, Smith's message influences respondents' attitudes. As reported in Table **??**, we find some evidence that respondents become less likely to say they would vote for Trump in the Republican primary (Column 1), a finding significant at the 90% confidence level. In effect, when making his case to the public, the prosecutor suffers a shoot the messenger effect but still delivers his message.

Remarkably, when we examine respondents who identify as political moderates, we find that legal messaging even reduces intention of voting for Trump. In Table **??**, we subset our dataset to political moderates, defined as respondents who describe themselves as "Slightly Conservative" or more liberal on a traditional, 7-point scale that measures ideology from liberal to conservative. This moderate subset ($n = 1,971$) covers approximately two-thirds, or 69%, of our total sample.

Table 2: Legal Messaging Strongly Reduces Support for the Prosecutor

|  | Dependent variable: | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Trump Vote | Smith Support | Pros. Support | DOJ Support |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| Smith Treatment | −0.155 | −0.268*** | 0.054 | −0.038 |
|  | (0.111) | (0.034) | (0.037) | (0.059) |
| Trump Treatment | 0.016 | −0.052 | 0.042 | 0.022 |
|  | (0.111) | (0.034) | (0.037) | (0.059) |
| Lean R | 0.466*** | 0.032 | −0.104*** | 0.011 |
|  | (0.115) | (0.035) | (0.038) | (0.076) |
| Solid R | 1.231*** | −0.064 | −0.215*** | 0.678 |
|  | (0.130) | (0.040) | (0.043) | (0.502) |
| College Educated | −0.253*** | 0.038 | 0.044 | −0.101** |
|  | (0.093) | (0.028) | (0.031) | (0.050) |
| Trump Favorability | 4.339*** | −0.201*** | −0.771*** | −0.184*** |
|  | (0.099) | (0.030) | (0.033) | (0.051) |
| Percieve DOJ | 0.164 | 0.011 | −0.140*** | −1.154*** |
|  | (0.100) | (0.030) | (0.033) | (0.055) |
| Male | 0.052 | −0.047 | 0.007 | −0.015 |
|  | (0.097) | (0.029) | (0.032) | (0.051) |
| Age | −0.012*** | 0.0002 | −0.007*** | −0.002 |
|  | (0.003) | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.002) |
| Constant | 4.372*** | 0.089* | 3.350*** | 3.371*** |
|  | (0.170) | (0.052) | (0.056) | (0.107) |
| Observations | 2,856 | 2,862 | 2,862 | 1,258 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.466 | 0.044 | 0.221 | 0.291 |

*Note:* $^{*}$p<0.1; $^{**}$p<0.05; $^{***}$p<0.01

Table 3: Among Independents and Republican Leaners, the Legal Treatment Reduces Support for the Prosecutor

| | _Dependent variable:_ | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | trump_vote<br>Trump Vote | smith_change<br>Smith Change | pros_index<br>Pros Support |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Smith Treatment | −0.262* | −0.224*** | 0.080* |
| | (0.138) | (0.039) | (0.043) |
| Trump Treatment | −0.007 | −0.043 | 0.028 |
| | (0.139) | (0.039) | (0.043) |
| Lean R | 0.441*** | 0.053 | −0.104*** |
| | (0.121) | (0.034) | (0.038) |
| College Educated | −0.204* | 0.063* | 0.004 |
| | (0.117) | (0.033) | (0.036) |
| Trump Favorability | 4.561*** | −0.226*** | −0.789*** |
| | (0.117) | (0.033) | (0.036) |
| DOJ Perception | 0.143 | −0.009 | −0.164*** |
| | (0.128) | (0.036) | (0.040) |
| Male | 0.111 | −0.058* | 0.008 |
| | (0.121) | (0.034) | (0.038) |
| Age | −0.015*** | 0.0002 | −0.004*** |
| | (0.003) | (0.001) | (0.001) |
| Constant | 4.403*** | 0.072 | 3.283*** |
| | (0.202) | (0.057) | (0.063) |
| Observations | 2,018 | 2,023 | 2,023 |
| R² | 0.462 | 0.046 | 0.221 |
| Adjusted R² | 0.460 | 0.042 | 0.218 |
| Residual Std. Error | 2.529 (df = 2009) | 0.712 (df = 2014) | 0.792 (df = 2014) |
| F Statistic | 215.469*** (df = 8; 2009) | 12.044*** (df = 8; 2014) | 71.309*** (df = 8; 20 |

_Note:_

In Table **??**, Column 1 shows that exposure to rhetoric from Jack Smith about the prosecution decreases moderates' self-reported intention of voting for Trump in the Republican primaries, a finding significant at the 99% confidence level. However, this effect is limited in size; the magnitude of the coefficient indicates a loss for Trump of approximately 3.6 percentage points in voting intention among moderates.

At the same time that moderates become less likely to report voting for Trump, they also become less favorable toward Smith. As shown in Column 3 of Table **??**, the Smith treatment decreases moderate respondents' favorability toward Smith, a finding significant at the 99% confidence level. In other words, even respondents with relatively moderate political views "shoot the messenger."

Among conservatives, this negative effect on attitudes toward the prosecutor is even stronger. In Table 4, we subset the data to look only at conservatives, defined as respondents who describe their ideology as "Conservative" or "Very Conservative." Among conservatives, we find that the negative effect of the Smith condition on *Prosecutor Favorability* is more than three times larger in magnitude than it is among moderates. Thus, although moderates also "shoot the messenger," the backlash against the prosecutor is especially fierce among conservatives.

## 4.3   Neither Legal Nor Partisan Messaging Fuels Polarization or Undermines Democratic Norms

Finally, and reassuringly for U.S. democracy, we find in Table 5 that neither of our two treatment conditions has any statistically significant effect on support for violations of democratic norms or affective polarization in our full sample. In Column 1, we show that neither the Smith nor Trump condition caused a significant increase in respondents' support for "direct retaliation," measured as an additive index of three questions that assessed whether respondents would support a Republican president retaliating in direct response to Trump's prosecution (e.g., by firing the prosecutor). In Column 2, we similarly find no evidence that the Smith or Trump condition increased respondents' support for "indirect retaliation," measured as an additive index of three survey items that assessed whether respondents agreed with violating democratic norms (e.g., using political violence) that were beyond the issue area of Trump's prosecution. In Column 3, we show that neither treatment had a significant effect on affective polarization, defined in terms of the difference between respondents' favorability toward the two parties. Thus, for our full sample of respondents, we find that the competing framings of Trump's prosecution neither accelerate nor slow an erosion of public support for

Table 4: Among Conservatives, Legal Messaging Hurts the Prosecutor Even More

| | Dependent variable: | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Vote for Trump | Trump Favorability | Prosecutor Favorability | Support for Prosecution |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| Smith Condition | 0.180 | 0.077 | −0.467*** | −0.038 |
| | (0.187) | (0.097) | (0.093) | (0.067) |
| Trump Condition | 0.225 | 0.015 | 0.017 | −0.012 |
| | (0.189) | (0.098) | (0.094) | (0.067) |
| College Educated | −0.485*** | −0.225*** | 0.343*** | 0.098* |
| | (0.154) | (0.080) | (0.076) | (0.055) |
| Trump Favorability | 4.785*** | 3.109*** | −0.219** | −0.974*** |
| | (0.181) | (0.094) | (0.090) | (0.065) |
| Perception of DOJ | −0.029 | 0.222*** | 0.132* | −0.052 |
| | (0.159) | (0.083) | (0.079) | (0.057) |
| Male | −0.040 | 0.048 | 0.094 | 0.030 |
| | (0.158) | (0.082) | (0.079) | (0.056) |
| Age | −0.005 | −0.008*** | −0.019*** | −0.010*** |
| | (0.004) | (0.002) | (0.002) | (0.002) |
| Constant | 4.665*** | 3.500*** | 3.653*** | 3.410*** |
| | (0.293) | (0.152) | (0.146) | (0.105) |
| Observations | 885 | 885 | 888 | 888 |
| R$^2$ | 0.455 | 0.578 | 0.142 | 0.244 |
| Adjusted R$^2$ | 0.451 | 0.574 | 0.136 | 0.238 |

*Note:*          *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

democratic norms.

When we subset our data to look at political moderates, we find encouraging signs that legal messaging from the prosecutor can slightly increase support for democratic norms. In Column 1 of Table 6, we show that among moderates, exposure to legal messaging decreases respondents' agreement with the following norm violation: "If a Republican is elected president, the president should fire the prosecutors who brought criminal charges against Donald Trump." Furthermore, in Column 2 of Table 6, we find that among moderates, the legal treatment decreases respondents' agreement with a second norm violation: "If a Republican is elected president, the president should bring the Department of Justice and FBI under direct presidential control." However, as shown in Column 3, the legal treatment did not have a statistically significant effect among moderates on agreement with a third norm violation: "If a Republican is elected president, the president should open criminal investigations into the behavior of Democrats like Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer." Among moderates, then, we find that the Smith treatment had incomplete but nonetheless positive effects on respondents' support for democratic norms.

However, when we subset our data to study political conservatives, we find the opposite: that partisan messaging from Trump can slightly increase support for *violating* democratic norms. As shown in Column 1 of Table 7, among conservatives, exposure to Trump's rhetoric increases respondents' support for one of the three statements discussed above: firing the prosecutors who investigated Trump. However, we find no evidence that Trump's rhetoric increases support among conservatives for politicizing the DOJ and FBI or for prosecuting prominent Democratic party figures. Somewhat reassuringly, among staunch conservatives, Trump's rhetoric does not provoke support for forms of retaliation more extreme than firing Trump's prosecutors.

## 4.4 Discussion

Taken together, our results suggest that citizens' exposure to competing narratives about Trump's prosecution has limited negative effects for U.S. democracy and that exposure to the pro-prosecution rhetoric may have some pro-democratic effects. Our survey shows that legal messaging can increase respondents' perception of the prosecution as apolitical and democratic. We also find that Trump suffers a modest but statistically significant penalty - a penalty that is greater among moderate Republican voters - when they are exposed to Jack Smith's arguments in favor of the legitimacy of the prosecution. Jack Smith, however, falls on the sword and suffers a significant decline in public approval in order to deliver his

Table 5: Null Effects of Smith and Trump

| | _Dependent variable:_ | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | direct_index<br>Direct Norms | indirect_index<br>Indirect Norms | affpol<br>Affective Polarizat |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Smith Treatment | −0.043<br>(0.041) | −0.023<br>(0.046) | −0.753<br>(1.554) |
| Trump Treatment | 0.023<br>(0.041) | −0.036<br>(0.046) | −1.114<br>(1.550) |
| Lean R | −0.083**<br>(0.042) | −0.264***<br>(0.048) | 18.369***<br>(1.607) |
| Solid R | 0.297***<br>(0.047) | 0.160***<br>(0.054) | 37.458***<br>(1.812) |
| College Educated | −0.059*<br>(0.034) | −0.100***<br>(0.039) | −6.042***<br>(1.299) |
| Trump Favorability | 0.928***<br>(0.036) | 0.631***<br>(0.041) | 25.786***<br>(1.384) |
| Percieve DOJ | 0.298***<br>(0.037) | 0.223***<br>(0.041) | −4.025***<br>(1.394) |
| Male | −0.013<br>(0.035) | 0.009<br>(0.040) | −0.951<br>(1.353) |
| Age | −0.003***<br>(0.001) | −0.014***<br>(0.001) | 0.282***<br>(0.038) |
| Constant | 2.871***<br>(0.062) | 3.129***<br>(0.070) | −4.071*<br>(2.373) |
| Observations | 2,837 | 2,837 | 2,856 |
| $R^2$ | 0.278 | 0.176 | 0.291 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.276 | 0.173 | 0.289 |
| Residual Std. Error | 0.880 (df = 2827) | 0.997 (df = 2827) | 33.750 (df = 284 |
| F Statistic | 121.204*** (df = 9; 2827) | 66.929*** (df = 9; 2827) | 129.935*** (df = 9; |

_Note:_ $^*$p<0.1; $^{**}$p<0.05; $^{***}$p<

17

Table 6: Among Moderates, Legal Messaging Reduces Support for Some Norm Violations

| | Dependent variable: | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Firing Prosecutor | Politicizing DOJ and FBI | Prosecuting Democrats |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Smith Condition | −0.129** | −0.145** | −0.004 |
| | (0.064) | (0.063) | (0.059) |
| | | | |
| Trump Condition | −0.001 | −0.011 | −0.038 |
| | (0.064) | (0.063) | (0.059) |
| | | | |
| College Educated | −0.080 | −0.098* | −0.055 |
| | (0.054) | (0.054) | (0.050) |
| | | | |
| Trump Favorability | 1.066*** | 0.739*** | 0.818*** |
| | (0.054) | (0.053) | (0.049) |
| | | | |
| Perception of DOJ | 0.362*** | 0.211*** | 0.199*** |
| | (0.059) | (0.058) | (0.054) |
| | | | |
| Male | 0.070 | −0.084 | −0.156*** |
| | (0.057) | (0.056) | (0.052) |
| | | | |
| Age | −0.002 | −0.008*** | 0.002 |
| | (0.002) | (0.002) | (0.002) |
| | | | |
| Constant | 2.623*** | 3.001*** | 3.104*** |
| | (0.089) | (0.088) | (0.082) |
| | | | |
| Observations | 1,958 | 1,958 | 1,958 |
| $R^2$ | 0.200 | 0.120 | 0.139 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.197 | 0.117 | 0.136 |
| Note: | | | *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 |

Table 7: Among Conservatives, Trump's Rhetoric Increases Support for Firing Trump's Prosecutor

| | _Dependent variable:_ | | |
| | Firing Prosecutor | Politicizing DOJ and FBI | Prosecuting Democrats |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Smith Condition | 0.023 | 0.085 | 0.008 |
| | (0.096) | (0.107) | (0.088) |
| | | | |
| Trump Condition | 0.199** | 0.145 | 0.031 |
| | (0.097) | (0.108) | (0.089) |
| | | | |
| College Educated | −0.015 | −0.149* | −0.097 |
| | (0.079) | (0.088) | (0.072) |
| | | | |
| Trump Favorability | 1.373*** | 1.111*** | 1.038*** |
| | (0.093) | (0.103) | (0.085) |
| | | | |
| Perception of DOJ | 0.379*** | 0.349*** | 0.402*** |
| | (0.082) | (0.091) | (0.075) |
| | | | |
| Male | 0.152* | 0.098 | −0.207*** |
| | (0.081) | (0.090) | (0.074) |
| | | | |
| Age | −0.001 | −0.014*** | 0.003 |
| | (0.002) | (0.002) | (0.002) |
| | | | |
| Constant | 2.485*** | 3.060*** | 3.173*** |
| | (0.151) | (0.167) | (0.137) |
| | | | |
| Observations | 879 | 879 | 879 |
| $R^2$ | 0.246 | 0.182 | 0.193 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.240 | 0.176 | 0.187 |
| _Note:_ | | | *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 |

message. Finally, our results find limited evidence that public arguments about the legitimacy of Jack Smith's prosecution of Donald Trump affect support of democratic norms or levels of affective polarization. Compared to the control, neither treatment condition affects support for a Republican president to engage in direct or indirect retaliation.

Why did competing rhetoric about Trump's prosecution *fail* to reinforce or undermine citizens' support for democratic norms? Crucially, we posited in our pre-analysis plan that increased affective polarization and increased disapproval of the prosecution would mediate any effect on support for democratic norms, but we find little evidence that our treatments affected these proposed mediation pathways. Although we find some effects of the Smith treatment on support for the prosecution, neither the Smith nor Trump conditions significantly affected levels of affective polarization. In fact, the virulently hostile Trump condition slightly, albeit not significantly, *decreased* affective polarization in the full sample.

There are three possible explanations for the null effects we find on our proposed mediators and support for democratic norms. One explanation for this finding is that our treatments simply were not strong enough to affect the causal pathways we posited as responsible for support for spirals of norm violations. However, we note that our treatments were strong and direct video messages with substantial external validity: these clips were both played repeatedly on national media outlets, and it is likely that many U.S. voters are exposed to these messages. A second, related explanation is that respondents may already have been exposed to the message conveyed in the Trump treatment condition, in particular. That is, Trump's rhetoric may not have provided respondents with any new information. We are thus careful to note that we can only claim that Trump's rhetoric did not have any additional marginal effect on our respondents. Finally, we note a general trend of null or weak findings of survey treatments on support for democratic norms. Recent papers such as Wuttke, Sichart and Foos (2023) and Voelkel et al. (2023) have found that large percentages of survey treatments intended to ameliorate anti-democratic attitudes have null effects or small and rapidly decaying effects. Altering citizens' support for democratic norms may require much more intensive engagement than a brief online survey can provide.

Despite these caveats, we think our findings provide some evidence *against* recent arguments suggesting spiraling violations of democratic norms operate in the realm of public opinion. Trump's rhetoric about the prosecution may be normatively troubling but it does not seem to substantially drive desire for retaliation among Republicans - and the types of retaliation it does spur are isolated to narrow efforts to remove Jack Smith rather than wholesale violations of democratic norms.

# 5  Appendix

# A  Texts of the Placebo and Treatment Videos

## A.1  Full Text of Placebo Video

Male presenter: "Julia Borsten's out west sitting down exclusively with tech venture capitalist and co-founder of Sun Micro Systems Vinod Khosla. Julia, take it away."

Female presenter: "Thanks so much Brian. And Vinod Khosla, a legendary investor in Khosla ventures. Thank you so much for joining us here today."

Vinod Khosla: "Great to be here."

Female Presenter: "So Vinod, you were one of the earliest investors in OpenAI. You put in a 50 million dollar check back in 2019. What is your outlook now on AI valuations? And which companies are best positioned to succeed in the AI space over the long run?"

Vinod Khosla: "Well, AI will have a large impact on society, and it's a 20 year run, so a lot of value to be created. But there is also a lot of hype, and most valuations are over-hyped. So I would say most are too high. The ones–and one has to pick really carefully–most companies will lose money. But more money will be made than lost."

Female Presenter: "For the companies that you're betting on now to succeed, how essential is it for them to partner with the tech giants? Obviously, OpenAI has this big partnership with Microsoft. Is it possible for earlier stage AI investments to succeed?..."

## A.2  Full Text of Smith's Statement

Jack Smith: "Today, an indictment was unsealed charging Donald J. Trump with felony violations of our national security laws, as well as participating in a conspiracy to obstruct justice. This indictment was voted by a grand jury of citizens in the southern district of Florida, and I invite everyone to read it in full to understand the scope and the gravity of the crimes charged. The men and women of the United States intelligence community and our armed forces dedicate their lives to protecting our nation and its people. Our laws that protect national defense information are critical to the safety and security of the United States, and they must be enforced. Violations of those laws put our country at risk. Adherence to the rule of law is a bedrock principle of the Department of Justice, and our nation's commitment to the rule of law sets an example for the world. We have one set of laws in this country, and they apply to everyone."

## A.3  Full Text of Trump's Statement

Donald Trump: "Today we witnessed the most evil and heinous abuse of power in the history of our country. A very sad thing to watch. A corrupt sitting president had his top political opponent arrested on fake and fabricated charges of which he and numerous other presidents would be guilty, right in the middle of a presidential election, in which he is losing very badly. This is called election interference and yet another attempt to rig and steal a presidential election. More importantly, it's a political persecution like something straight out of a fascist or communist nation. This day will go down in infamy, and Joe Biden will forever be remembered as not only the most corrupt president in the history of our country but perhaps even more importantly the president who together with a band of his closest thugs, misfits, and Marxists, tried to destroy American democracy. But they will fail, and we will win bigger and better than ever before."

# B  Attitudes toward Smith in the Smith Condition

Our key question is: Does the Smith treatment cause a backlash against Smith? Right now, it is not clear how we should interpret the negative effect on Smith approval. There are two possible interpretations. First, people knew who Smith was, but watching Smith made them *dislike* him and downgrade their opinion from "neither favorable nor unfavorable" (3) to "unfavorable" (1 or 2).

The second possibility is that people already disliked the prosecutor investigating Trump, but they didn't know Smith was that prosecutor. When they watch the video, they change their opinion from "neither favorable nor unfavorable" (3) to "unfavorable" (1 or 2).

1. *Pre-treatment:* Subset to the Smith condition. Insert a table here with pre-treatment attitudes toward Smith in the Smith condition.

2. *Post-treatment:* Subset to the Smith condition. Insert a table here with post-treatment attitudes toward Smith in the Smith condition.

3. If we code no opinion as NA, what is the mean level of pre-treatment Smith approval? If we code no opinion as NA, what is the mean level of post-treatment Smith approval?

4. If we code no opinion as NA, do we still find a statistically significant effect?

5. If we exclude the NAs (i.e., people who did not know Jack Smith), what is the *change* in Smith approval in the Smith condition? It may be that people's attitudes toward Smith even increase!

6. If we do not get strong results from this investigation, we can run a question on the Harvard monthly poll.

   2.8959 excluding the NAs. So there is still a reduction in liking Smith.

# C   Heterogeneous Effects

We begin with heterogenous treatment effects as estimated by the Generalized Random Forest package (grf) in R, developed by Athey and Wagner. This package uses a causal forest approach to more precisely estimate conditional average treatment effects (CATEs) compared to traditional interaction models. We find, consistent with our expectations, that pre-treatment Trump favorability predicts CATEs of the Smith treatment, such that those who are less favorable towards Trump in the first place think relatively more positively of Smith after hearing his message while Trump enthusiasts turn against Smith when he justified the prosecution of Trump.
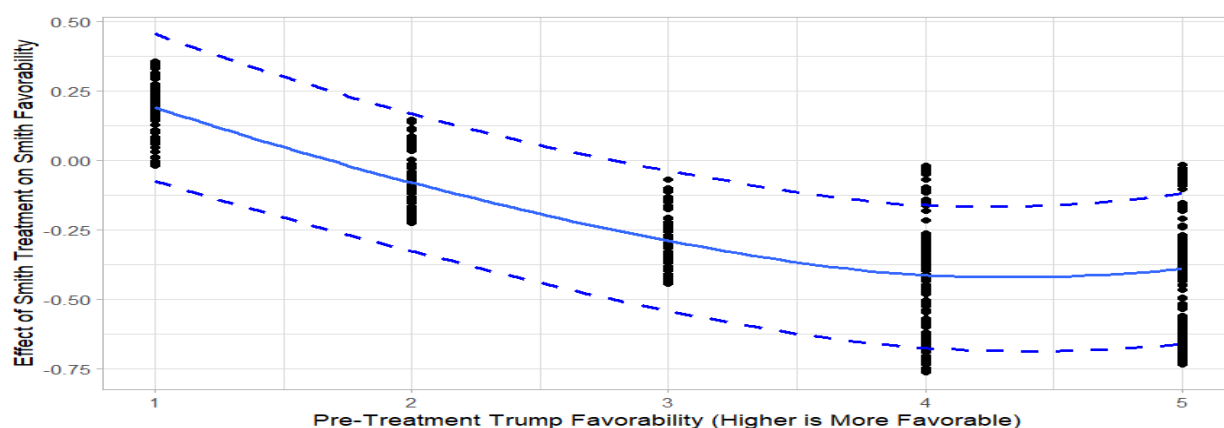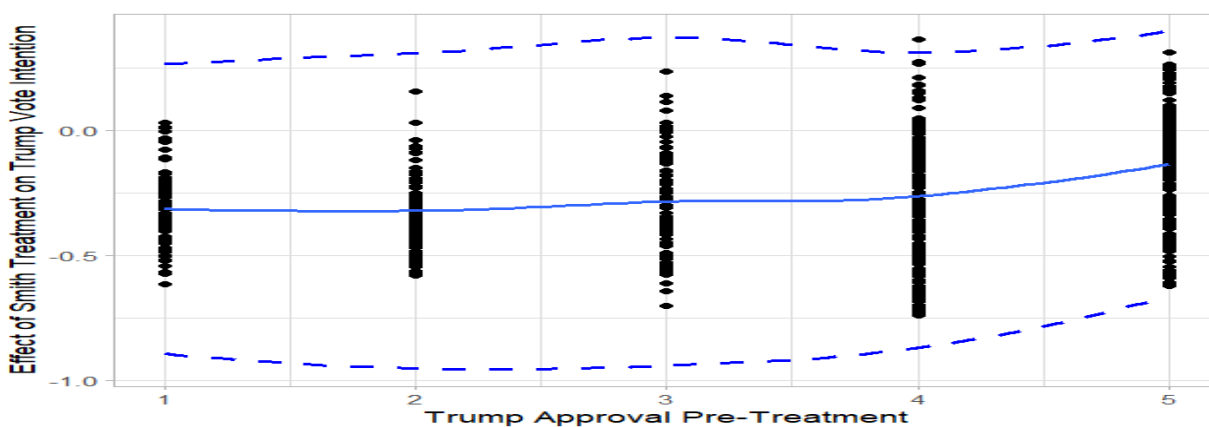


Figure 1: CATEs by Trump Favorability



Figure 2: CATEs by Smith Favorability

# D   Descriptive Statistics

- We begin with descriptive statistics on Jack Smith perceptions. Among the condition assigned to view Jack Smith, approval of Smith fell from 2.94 to 2.65 on a 5 point scale.

- Our sample is very female (2 to 1 ratio of females to males)

- Our sample is strongly supportive of electoral concessions by losers of elections with 2/3 of the sample saying such behavior is strongly, slightly or somewhat democratic

- Our sample is noticeably less convinced that ignoring court rulings is bad for democracy, with about half the sample saying such behavior is at least slightly democratic.

Table 8

| Statistic | N | Mean | St. Dev. | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Direct Norms (5 point scale) | 2,837 | 3.459 | 1.035 | 1.000 | 5.000 |
| Indirect Norms (5 Point Scale) | 2,837 | 2.890 | 1.096 | 1.000 | 5.000 |
| Age | 3,068 | 42.837 | 16.704 | 18 | 92 |
| Male | 3,068 | 0.332 | 0.471 | 0 | 1 |
| Moderate Ideology | 3,068 | 0.690 | 0.462 | 0 | 1 |
| Trump Pre-Approval (5 point scale) | 3,068 | 3.622 | 1.358 | 1 | 5 |

# E    Attrition

We experienced modest attrition over the course of the study. 95 subjects in the placebo condition, 67 in the Smith condition an 69 in the Trump condition failed to complete some component of the outcome measure though. We note differential missingess such that the placebo condition appears to have more attrited respondents (which we attribute to the non-topical and possibly dis-engaging nature of the video. However, we note these are substantively small levels of attrited respondents. We employ trimming bounds to bracket our ATE for always reporters. This approach requires a monotonicty assumption about reporting that all units that did not report in the Smith condition would also have not reported in the placebo. Given these assumptions our ATE remains negative and statistically significant as the upper end of our trimming bounds are -.222 with a p-value of 0.

# F    Components of Prosecution Index

Table 9: Moderates: Components of Prosecution Support Index

| | *Dependent variable:* | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Factually True | Prosecution Apolitical | Prosecution Democratic |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Smith Condition | −0.032 | 0.176*** | 0.182*** |
| | (0.060) | (0.061) | (0.063) |
| Trump Condition | 0.102* | 0.125** | −0.031 |
| | (0.060) | (0.061) | (0.062) |
| College Educated | 0.112** | −0.051 | 0.018 |
| | (0.051) | (0.052) | (0.053) |
| Trump Favorability | −0.676*** | −0.729*** | −0.770*** |
| | (0.050) | (0.051) | (0.052) |
| Perception of DOJ | 0.063 | −0.228*** | −0.271*** |
| | (0.056) | (0.056) | (0.058) |
| Male | 0.087 | −0.019 | −0.046 |
| | (0.053) | (0.054) | (0.056) |
| Age | −0.00005 | −0.004*** | −0.006*** |
| | (0.002) | (0.002) | (0.002) |
| Constant | 3.255*** | 2.776*** | 3.382*** |
| | (0.084) | (0.085) | (0.087) |
| Observations | 1,974 | 1,974 | 1,974 |
| $R^2$ | 0.092 | 0.113 | 0.127 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.089 | 0.110 | 0.124 |

*Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

# G    Components of Norm Violations

Table 10: Among Conservatives, Neither Treatment Affects Support for the Prosecution

|  | *Dependent variable:* | | |
|---|---|---|---|
|  | Factually True | Prosecution Apolitical | Prosecution Democratic |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Smith Condition | −0.121 | −0.016 | 0.021 |
|  | (0.110) | (0.090) | (0.094) |
| Trump Condition | 0.215* | −0.173* | −0.079 |
|  | (0.111) | (0.091) | (0.095) |
| College Educated | 0.371*** | −0.072 | −0.004 |
|  | (0.090) | (0.074) | (0.077) |
| Trump Favorability | −0.934*** | −0.833*** | −1.154*** |
|  | (0.106) | (0.087) | (0.091) |
| Perception of DOJ | 0.300*** | −0.188** | −0.268*** |
|  | (0.093) | (0.076) | (0.080) |
| Male | 0.184** | 0.001 | −0.096 |
|  | (0.093) | (0.076) | (0.080) |
| Age | −0.012*** | −0.010*** | −0.009*** |
|  | (0.003) | (0.002) | (0.002) |
| Constant | 3.673*** | 2.996*** | 3.560*** |
|  | (0.172) | (0.141) | (0.147) |
| Observations | 888 | 888 | 888 |
| $R^2$ | 0.132 | 0.134 | 0.196 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.125 | 0.127 | 0.190 |

*Note:*            *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

# H    Covariate Balance Tests

Balance Tests:

Table 11: Full Sample

|  | Dependent variable: | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | direct1 | direct2 | direct3 |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Smith Condition | −0.082 | −0.074 | −0.001 |
|  | (0.053) | (0.055) | (0.049) |
| Trump Condition | 0.056 | 0.031 | −0.022 |
|  | (0.053) | (0.055) | (0.049) |
| moderate | −0.304*** | −0.251*** | −0.336*** |
|  | (0.049) | (0.050) | (0.045) |
| college | −0.056 | −0.104** | −0.068* |
|  | (0.045) | (0.046) | (0.041) |
| trumpfavor | 1.144*** | 0.835*** | 0.873*** |
|  | (0.046) | (0.048) | (0.043) |
| justice_partisan | 0.374*** | 0.265*** | 0.273*** |
|  | (0.048) | (0.049) | (0.044) |
| GenderMale | 0.100** | −0.018 | −0.169*** |
|  | (0.047) | (0.048) | (0.043) |
| Age | −0.002 | −0.010*** | 0.002** |
|  | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.001) |
| Constant | 2.816*** | 3.224*** | 3.372*** |
|  | (0.091) | (0.093) | (0.083) |
| Observations | 2,837 | 2,837 | 2,837 |
| $R^2$ | 0.240 | 0.149 | 0.188 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.237 | 0.147 | 0.185 |

*Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

**Smith versus Placebo Balance Test Using F-Stat**

**Smith versus Trump Balance Test Using F-Stat**

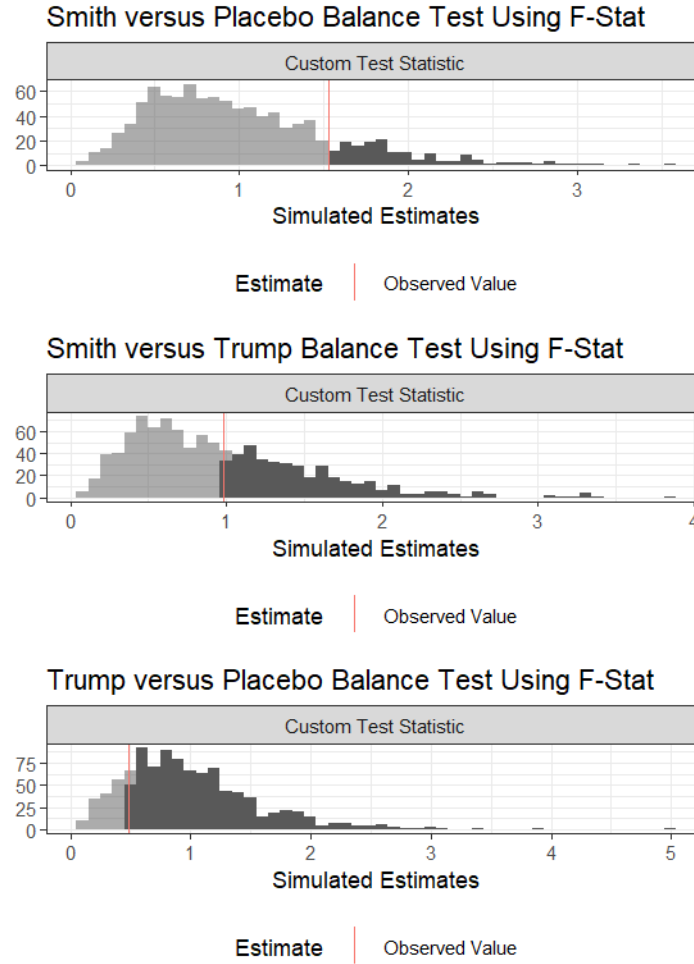**Trump versus Placebo Balance Test Using F-Stat**

Figure 3: Randomization Inference Balance Tests Assuming the Null of No Joint Significance of Covariates Predicting Treatment Assignment. These tests show p values of .162, .41 and .843 respectively suggesting we fail to reject the null hypotheses of correctly conducted random assignment at the 90% confidence level.

## FDR-Corrected $p$ Values

Now we conduct false discovery corrections. We use a Benjamini-Hochberg correction on our main results. Unsurprisingly given a range of marginally significant p-values, the negative effects on Smith's reputation are the only finding that survives this correction procedure.

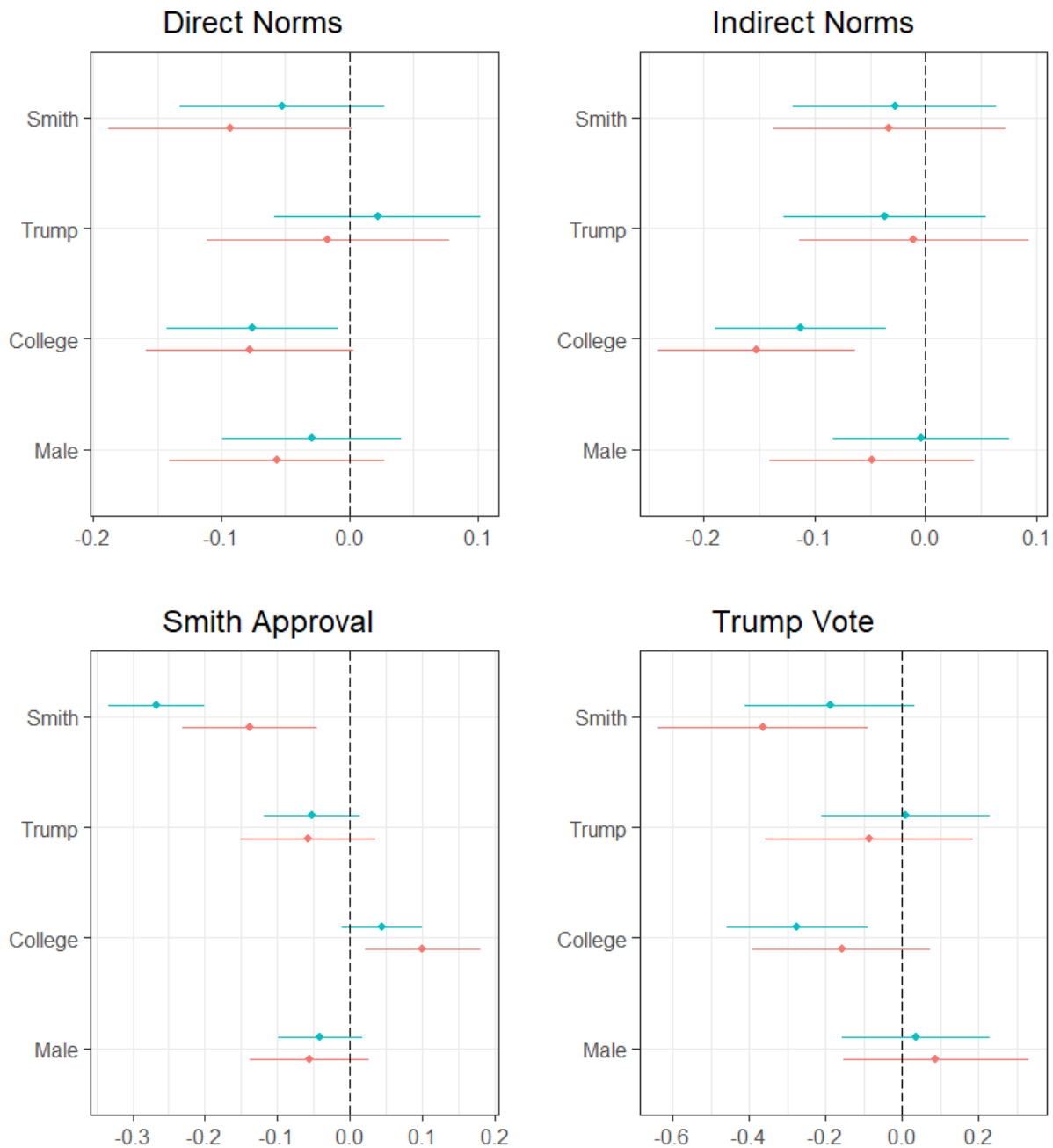|  | Direct Norms | Indirect | AffPol | Vote Trump | Smith Approve | Pros Support |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Raw | .199 | .552 | .254 | .0948 | .000 | .098 |
| BH-Adjusted | .299 | .552 | .305 | .197 | .000 | .196 |

Figure 4: Coefficients Plots for Norms and Smith Approval Outcomes, With 95% CIs. Red coefficients are for the moderate sub-sample and blue are for the full sample

## Smith Attitudes

We also present here descriptive statistics on knowledge of Smith. We have two main findings. First, weak prior attitudes. Second, there is a major increase in unfavorable attitudes toward
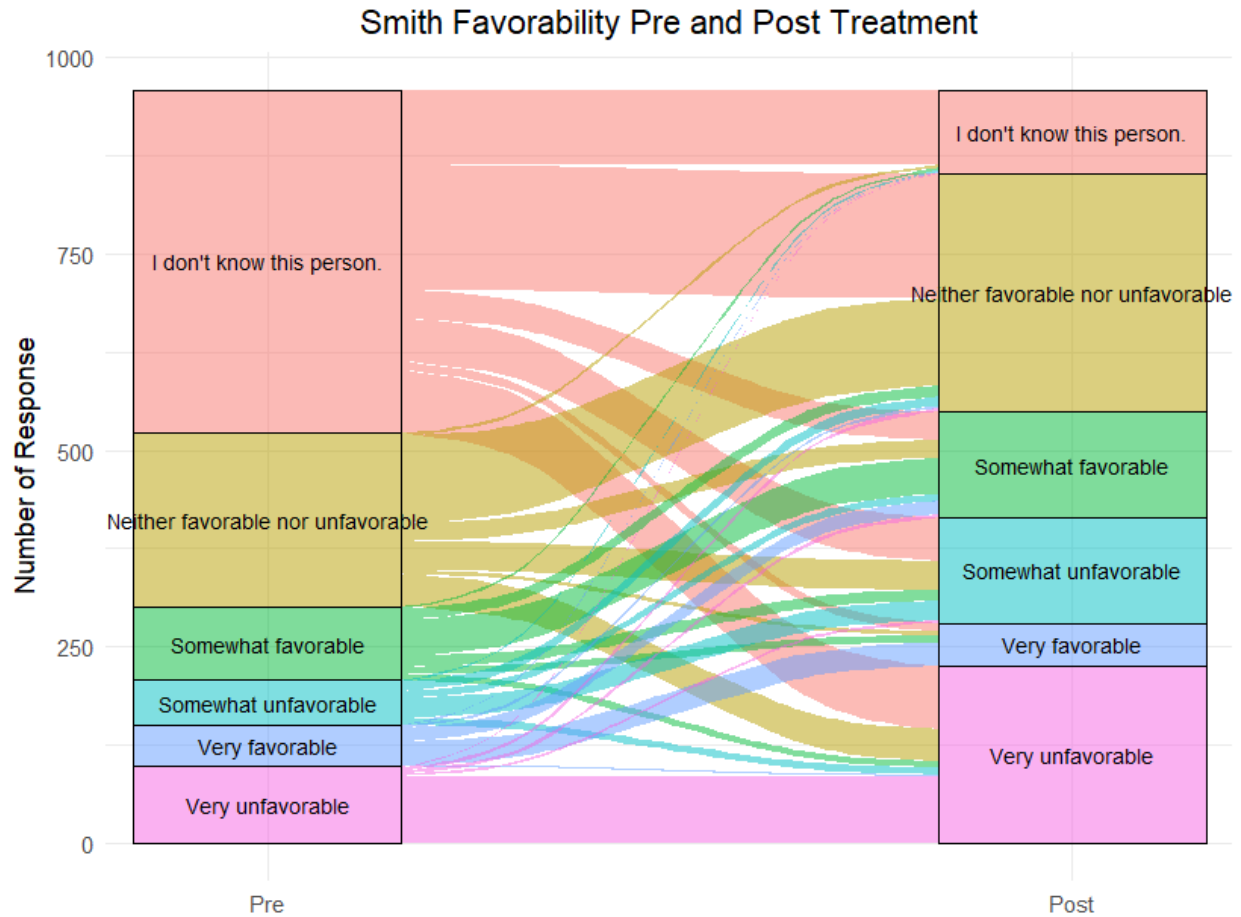
Figure 5: Alluvial Plot Tracks Respondents' Attitudes towards Jack Smith among Respondents in the Smith Condition

Smith.

Table 12: Pre- and Pos-Treatment Attitudes toward Smith in the Smith Condition

| Attitudes | Pre-Treatment | Post-Treatment |
|---|---|---|
| I don't know this person. | 0.46 | 0.10 |
| Very favorable | 0.05 | 0.05 |
| Somewhat favorable | 0.10 | 0.13 |
| Neither favorable nor unfavorable | 0.23 | 0.30 |
| Somewhat unfavorable | 0.06 | 0.13 |
| Very unfavorable | 0.10 | 0.22 |
| Attrition | NA | 0.06 |

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Table 13

| | trump_vote<br>Trump Vote | smith_change<br>Smith Change | pros_index<br>Pros Support | post_doj_n<br>DOJ Support |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Dependent variable:* | | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| Smith Treatment | −0.465** | 0.060 | 0.155** | −0.089 |
| | (0.186) | (0.056) | (0.062) | (0.099) |
| Trump Treatment | 0.019 | −0.072 | 0.048 | 0.050 |
| | (0.185) | (0.056) | (0.061) | (0.097) |
| Lean R | 0.486*** | 0.042 | −0.106*** | 0.018 |
| | (0.115) | (0.035) | (0.038) | (0.076) |
| College Educated | 1.252*** | −0.050 | −0.208*** | 0.225 |
| | (0.130) | (0.039) | (0.043) | (0.270) |
| Trump Favorability | −0.251*** | 0.035 | 0.043 | −0.103** |
| | (0.093) | (0.028) | (0.031) | (0.050) |
| Percieve DOJ | 4.173*** | −0.043 | −0.717*** | −0.192** |
| | (0.166) | (0.050) | (0.055) | (0.088) |
| justice_partisan | 0.167* | 0.011 | −0.142*** | −1.151*** |
| | (0.100) | (0.030) | (0.033) | (0.055) |
| Male | 0.046 | −0.043 | 0.009 | −0.015 |
| | (0.097) | (0.029) | (0.032) | (0.052) |
| Age | −0.012*** | 0.00001 | −0.007*** | −0.002 |
| | (0.003) | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.002) |
| treatmentsmith:trumpfavor | 0.484** | −0.508*** | −0.156** | 0.077 |
| | (0.232) | (0.070) | (0.077) | (0.124) |
| treatmenttrump:trumpfavor | 0.002 | 0.024 | −0.010 | −0.050 |
| | (0.232) | (0.070) | (0.077) | (0.122) |
| Constant | 4.450*** | −0.010 | 3.320*** | 3.372*** |
| | (0.188) | (0.056) | (0.062) | (0.115) |
| Observations | 2,856   34 | 2,862 | 2,862 | 1,258 |
| $R^2$ | 0.470 | 0.072 | 0.225 | 0.296 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.468 | 0.068 | 0.222 | 0.290 |

*Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

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