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Partisan or Principled?

Explaining Political Differences in Attitudes About Violations of Democratic Norms

Paul E. Teas

Department of Political Science, University of Chicago

Author Note

Paul E. Teas <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4253-3759>

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Paul E. Teas, University of Chicago, 5828 S University Ave, Chicago, IL 60637, United States.

Email: pteas@uchicago.edu

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https://osf.io/bgrdc/?view_only=08bc940e109845888a5896d2ca74a5a1

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Abstract

Although both Democrats and Republicans tend to be more tolerant of democratic norm violations that benefit their own party, this pattern is not always symmetrical, even when political stakes appear identical. Two experiments ($N = 2,352$) tested competing explanations: that partisans differ in democratic commitment, their tendency to rationalize violations as legitimate, or the values they prioritize (e.g., voter access vs. election integrity). Both parties rationalized weaker opposition to beneficial violations as more democratic. However, Republicans in Study 1 were more responsive to partisan advantage without showing similarly greater democratic rationalization, and more tolerant of mail-in voting restrictions regardless of partisan benefit. These differences disappeared in Study 2 when different violations were tested, suggesting such asymmetries are issue-specific rather than fixed. Overall, the findings suggest that partisan gaps in support for democratic norm violations reflect the politicization of particular practices more than stable differences in commitment to democracy.

Keywords: democracy, partisan motivated reasoning, ideological asymmetry, political psychology

Americans broadly endorse democratic principles, but partisan divides often emerge when those principles are applied or challenged in practice. For example, Democrats often oppose election integrity policies like voter ID laws, citing concerns about voter access, whereas Republicans often oppose access-expanding policies like automatic voter registration, citing concerns about election security (Atkeson et al., 2014; Biggers & Bowler, 2022; Kane, 2017). These differences are generally attributed to political self-interest: partisans support practices they believe benefit their side and oppose those that don't. As a result, support for a given democratic practice often depends on who it is perceived to help.

Experimental studies generally support this view. When partisan advantage is held constant, Democrats and Republicans tend to respond similarly—suggesting a shared tendency to rationalize politically beneficial actions as consistent with democratic principles (e.g., Biggers, 2019; Biggers & Bowler, 2022; Graham & Svolik, 2020; McCoy et al., 2020; Touchton et al., 2020). Yet many of these same studies also document exceptions, with Republicans sometimes more accepting of undemocratic actions that benefit their party, even when partisan interests are controlled. What accounts for the partisan gaps that remain?

One possibility is that Republicans and Democrats differ not in their democratic commitments per se, but in how flexibly they apply them. One party may be more willing to reinterpret violations that benefit their party as democratic, while the other may hold those same violations to stricter standards. Another possibility is that one party is simply more willing to prioritize partisan goals over democratic norms—supporting undemocratic actions not because they see them as democratic, but because they see them as politically expedient. A third possibility is that the parties sincerely diverge in what they believe democracy requires. For instance, Republicans may emphasize election integrity, while Democrats prioritize ballot access

(Slater, 2022; Kane, 2017). That is, asymmetries may reflect competing normative commitments rather than motivated reasoning.

The present studies test these competing explanations. Across two experiments, I manipulate both the type of democratic principle being violated and whether the violation benefits or harms the participant's party. Crucially, I also measure both support and perceived democratic legitimacy, allowing for the test of whether asymmetry arises from differences in democratic rationalization, open disregard of democratic legitimacy, or principled disagreement. Together, the findings offer new insight into when and why partisan asymmetries in support for norm violations emerge—and when they do not.

Partisan Motivated Reasoning about Democracy

Democracy is a contested concept, but most definitions align with the institutional principles outlined by Dahl (1971, 1989), such as free and fair elections, universal suffrage, freedom of expression, government accountability, and the protection of political rights, along with informal norms derived from these formal principles, such as mutual toleration, compromise, and institutional forbearance (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The current research adopts this broader conception. For example, I examine violations related to electoral access as well as political responsiveness.

Disagreements about how these principles should apply in practice likely stem less from principle differences and more from perceived partisan implications. When a democratic practice or violation is seen to benefit one party, both sides engage in partisan motivated reasoning (PMR)—interpreting information in ways that support one's political goals (Kunda, 1990). In this context, partisans may dismiss violations that help their side or justify them as good for democracy or the country. A growing body of research shows that democratic norms are no

exception to this tendency. Preference for partisan considerations over democracy has been documented in reactions to campaign tactics (Claassen & Ensley, 2016), electoral reforms (2023), and public officials' democratic norm violations (Claassen et al., 2024, Study 1; Krishnarajan, 2022).

One way partisans may engage in PMR about democratic norm violations is by rationalizing politically beneficial violations as consistent with their conception of democracy. Krishnarajan (2022) found that partisans rated undemocratic actions as more democratic when they aligned with preferred policy outcomes, even more so than democratic actions that conflicted with their policy preferences. Their justifications often focused on policy benefits or invoked other values, indicating that people want to maintain a sense of democratic consistency and resolve cognitive dissonance by redefining democracy in line with partisan interests. In other words, opposition to politically beneficial violations does not evaporate simply out of disdain for democracy, but because democracy itself is reinterpreted through a partisan lens. Importantly, this pattern was not unique to one party. Both Democrats and Republicans engaged in this kind of rationalization, suggesting a common psychological process underlying partisan responses to democratic norm violations.

The Bipartisan Rationalization Hypothesis

If both parties engage in rationalization of beneficial violations as more democratic, asymmetry in support for democratic violations may arise not from inherent partisan differences, but because different practices are perceived to benefit one party more than the other. For example, policies thought to decrease turnout (e.g., voter ID laws and mail-in voting restrictions) have generally been perceived to help Republicans, while those thought to increase turnout (e.g., automatic registration and expanded early voting) are often seen as favoring Democrats (Wan,

2016; cf. Harden & Campos, 2023). Both parties may then rationalize these different policies as more or less democratic, with Republicans rationalizing politically beneficial voter ID laws as more democratic and Democrats seeing the turnout-driving policy of automatic voter registration as more democratic as well. These perceptions can create the illusion of more fundamental partisan differences when both parties are simply endorsing actions that help their side.

The *Bipartisan Rationalization Hypothesis* predicts that when partisan benefit is held constant—such as in experiments that manipulate which party gains—Democrats and Republicans should show symmetrical responses. In other words, both support and perceived democratic legitimacy should vary based on partisan advantage, not party affiliation. When real-world asymmetries are neutralized, symmetric motivated reasoning should emerge.

Unresolved Asymmetries

Yet, sometimes even holding partisan advantage constant, asymmetry remains. That is, even in studies that manipulate partisan advantage, sometimes one party—more often the Republican Party—exhibits motivated support for beneficial norm violations to a greater extent than the other. Gidengil et al. (2022) for instance, found that Republican voters are more likely than Democrats to support undemocratic candidates in pursuit of ideological goals. Moreover, Republicans have shown more support than Democrats for norm-eroding behaviors and for expanding executive authority when their party is in control of government (Touchton et al., 2020; cf. Littvay et al., 2024). Although both parties respond to partisan advantage when evaluating electoral reforms, Republicans' support appears more strongly shaped by partisan interest (Biggers, 2019; Biggers & Bowler, 2022). Moreover, Republicans' perceptions of election-rigging regarding changes to vote-by-mail were more affected than Democrats' by how the change could affect electoral prospects. That is, the gap in perceptions of election-rigging

between vote-by-mail changes that might help and those that might hurt one's party was larger for Republicans than Democrats (Claassen et al., 2024, Study 2).

The Asymmetric Commitment Hypothesis

Some would argue that a greater tendency to endorse certain democratic norm violations reflects a weaker commitment to democracy on the part of Republicans, who are thought by some to be dispositionally more authoritarian (Nilsson & Jost, 2020). That is, Republicans may demonstrate a greater tolerance than Democrats for politically beneficial democratic norm violations but not feel the need to couple this with greater democratic rationalization—either rationalizing through some other means or displaying more open acceptance of democratic subversion in exchange for partisan gain. If so, then some partisans may endorse undemocratic actions when politically beneficial *while acknowledging such actions as undemocratic*.

This distinction matters. Most prior studies infer motivated reasoning from support for norm violations that benefit one's party, but use a single outcome variable—such as vote choice (Graham & Svobik, 2020), support for anti-democratic policies (McCoy et al., 2020), or perceptions of election rigging (Claassen et al., 2024). However, these outcomes do not clarify whether individuals support beneficial actions because a) they rationalize them as more democratic, b) they rationalize them through some other means (e.g., fairness), or c) they are willing to accept anti-democratic actions outright. Without separate measures of perceived democratic legitimacy and support, it is difficult to disentangle democratic rationalization from open rejection of democratic norms and, by extension, to identify which psychological processes underlie partisan asymmetries.

Some evidence indicates that a greater tendency to openly endorse authoritarian actions on the part of Republicans might explain such asymmetry. For instance, Drutman et al. (2018)

found that conservatives, more than liberals, positively evaluated statements like “a strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress and elections,” and were more likely to view democracy as not always preferable. These findings suggest that some partisans may simply be more willing to trade democracy for partisan gain—even while recognizing that a given action is undemocratic. If so, asymmetries in support for norm violations may emerge without corresponding asymmetries in perceived democratic legitimacy, reflecting a more direct acceptance of democratic subversion or rationalization through other means.

The Asymmetric Rationalization Hypothesis

Another possibility is that Republicans engage in more motivated reasoning than Democrats when evaluating democratic norm violations. In this view, partisan differences in support do not reflect weaker democratic commitment per se, but a greater tendency to rationalize partisan gains as democratically legitimate. While partisan motivated reasoning is typically found to be symmetrical (Ditto et al., 2019), Republicans may show stronger rationalization in certain domains—particularly around elections. Some evidence suggests this may help explain beliefs about the legitimacy of the 2020 election and the events of January 6th (Painter & Fernandes, 2024), though empirical support remains limited. If the *Asymmetric Rationalization Hypothesis* holds, we should observe larger effects of partisan advantage on both support and perceived democratic legitimacy for Republicans compared to Democrats.

The Principled Asymmetry Hypothesis

Finally, asymmetry may not stem from differences in democratic commitment broadly, but from diverging priorities within democracy. Slater (2022), for example, argued that while both parties value competition and civil liberties, they differ in how much emphasis they place on voter access—Democrats see it as essential, Republicans less so. If such differences are sincerely held,

partisans should uphold those principles even when it disadvantages their party. For instance, Biggers & Bowler (2022) found that although partisans do respond to explicit cues about which party a policy benefits, Democrats consistently judged restrictions on voter access (e.g., voter roll purges) as more unfair than Republicans did, whereas Republicans were more likely to view expansions of access (e.g., automatic registration) as unfair. That is, partisan gaps in support for election-related policies may in part reflect genuine disagreement over democratic values.

The *Principled Asymmetry Hypothesis* builds on this logic: it holds that partisan differences in support for norm violations stem from different democratic priorities. As a result, opposition should 1) track perceived (un)democratic legitimacy and 2) depend in part on which principle is violated than on partisan benefit—but which principles drive opposition will vary by party.

In sum, although partisan differences in support for democratic norms and their violation might often result from context-specific differences in which democratic norms are perceived to benefit different parties, such differences may not be sufficient to explain all asymmetry. Several alternative explanations for asymmetry have yet to be systematically explored (see Table 1). Partisan differences could emerge from asymmetric levels of democratic commitment, from unequal tendencies to rationalize norm violations, or from sincere disagreements about which principles democracy requires. In two studies, I test these competing explanations by experimentally varying the principle being violated and whether the violation benefits or harms the respondent's political party, while measuring both perceived democratic legitimacy and opposition to each violation.

Table 1

Explanations for partisan asymmetry in attitudes about democratic norm violations.

Hypothesis	Explanation	Predicted Pattern
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The Bipartisan Rationalization Hypothesis	Both parties rationalize norm violations that benefit their own side by viewing them as more democratic. Apparent asymmetries arise only because different actions are perceived to benefit different parties.	When partisan advantage is experimentally controlled, Democrats and Republicans should show similar levels of support and perceived democracy.
The Asymmetric Rationalization Hypothesis	Republicans are more likely than Democrats to rationalize politically advantageous violations as democratic.	Party affiliation should moderate the effects of inparty advantage on support and perceived democracy.
The Asymmetric Commitment Hypothesis	Republicans are more willing than Democrats to support undemocratic actions when politically advantageous, even when recognizing them as undemocratic.	Party affiliation should moderate the effect of inparty advantage on support, but not on perceived democracy.
The Principled Asymmetry Hypothesis	Democrats and Republicans are committed to different democratic principles. These differences shape support even when partisan interest is manipulated.	The type of principle violated should interact with party affiliation to predict support and perceived democracy.

The Current Research

To test the above explanations for partisan asymmetry, I adopted a two-step approach. First, I conducted a pilot study identifying domains where partisan differences in perceptions of democratic norm violations emerge. Second, I conducted two experiments testing whether and why asymmetry arises when partisan interests are manipulated in those domains.

The first step was accomplished via a pre-registered pilot study designed to identify democratic principles that elicited the greatest perceptual differences between Democrats and Republicans. Participants rated the importance of nine democratic principles in the abstract and evaluated the undemocratic nature of 18 specific violations of those principles without any cues about partisan advantage (see S1 and S2).

In the abstract, Republicans prioritized election security, political protections, government accountability, and judicial authority more than Democrats, whereas Democrats prioritized voter access and competitive districts. However, violations of these principles were either perceived as more undemocratic by Democrats or equally undemocratic by both parties.

By measuring democratic priorities both in the abstract and in practice, the pilot made it possible to isolate the most salient cases of partisan asymmetry, and to identify cases where those differences plausibly reflected principled disagreement rather than strategic or partisan considerations. For example, Democrats ranked voter access as more important than Republicans and judged voter access violations as more undemocratic in practice—even when no party was specified to benefit—suggesting a principled difference in their valuation of voter access.

The pilot also confirmed that participants of both parties (1) viewed each violation as violating the intended principle and (2) most often perceived the specific violations as beneficial to neither party (see S3). While many democratic practices tested in prior research may allow for multiple interpretations across party lines (e.g., voter ID laws may be perceived as a violation of voter access by Democrats but upholding the principle of election security by Republicans), the vignettes selected for Study 1 were perceived by both Democrats and Republicans as violating the same principle. This consistency helps ensure that any partisan differences attributed to the type of principle violated in Study 1 reflect genuine differences in how partisans value that principle or practice, rather than divergent perceptions of which principle is at stake—enabling a cleaner test of the relative influence of partisan interest and principled disagreement.

The vignettes selected for Study 1 included: (1) a violation of voter access (prioritized by Democrats in principle and practice), (2) a violation of compromise (prioritized similarly by both parties), and (3) a violation of election security, a principle Republicans prioritized more than Democrats in the abstract.

Study 1

To examine the source of partisan asymmetry found in the pilot study, Study 1 manipulated whether specific violations of different democratic principles advantaged,

disadvantaged, or did not explicitly affect participants' political party. I then tested my four competing hypotheses by analyzing partisan differences in perceived democracy and support/opposition of each undemocratic action as a function of a) inparty advantage and b) the democratic principle violated by each action.

Method

Participants

One thousand participants were recruited via Cloud Research, balanced by political party (49% Republican, 51% Democrat).¹ After excluding pure independents, attention check failures, and cases with missing data, the final sample was 980 participants ($M_{Age} = 43.8$, $SD_{Age} = 13.5$). The sample was 40.8% male, 58.5% female, and 0.7% other. Racial composition was 77.6% White, 6.9% Black or African American, 6.7% Asian, 5.2% multiracial, 2.9% Latino/a, and 0.1% Native Hawaiian or Alaska Native.²

Design and Procedure

Each participant responded to three vignettes outlining democratic norm violations made by a hypothetical government official. The vignettes varied in 1) which principle was violated and 2) whether the violation helped, hurt, or did not explicitly affect the respondent's party.

Principle Domain. The vignettes selected for this study were chosen based on the findings from the pilot study. Three vignettes were selected: one describing a policy to reduce the window for mail-in voting—a violation of voter access, which Democrats prioritized more than Republicans both in the abstract and in practice; another describing a governor vetoing a

¹ Studies are pre-registered here: https://aspredicted.org/VNT_96Z, https://aspredicted.org/VNL_F6N, and https://aspredicted.org/VZR_65W. An earlier version followed these plans more closely, but based on reviewer feedback and further reflection, analyses and framing were revised to focus more directly on explanations for partisan asymmetry. These changes did not substantially alter the main conclusions. For pre-registered analyses, see (Teas, 2025, doctoral dissertation).

² Data and code for both studies can be found at https://osf.io/bgrdc/?view_only=08bc940e109845888a5896d2ca74a5a1.

popular bill proposed by the opposition—a violation of compromise,³ which both parties valued similarly; and a third describing a governor ignoring warnings that voting machines had been targeted for hacking—a violation of election security, a principle Republicans prioritized more than Democrats in the abstract, though not in practice (see Table 2 for vignette wordings).

Table 2

Vignettes used in Study 1.

Vignette	Principle Violated
Imagine a senator in your state proposes a policy that would reduce the time allowed to vote with a mail-in ballot from 4 weeks before election day to 1 week before election day.” (<i>In partisan conditions, this policy was said to decrease the share of [Democratic/Republican] votes in the next election.</i>) ⁴	Voter Access (more important to Democrats)
Imagine, at some point in the future, the FBI warns a governor of your state that a radical organization intends to hack newly implemented voting machines to tilt the election toward [Republicans/Democrats/one party]. The governor says he is not concerned and does not take further action.	Election Security (potentially more important to Republicans)
Imagine a future [Republican/Democratic/(blank)] governor of your state vetoes a bill passed by [Democrats/Republicans/the opposing party] in the legislature, despite polling showing popular support for the bill among the public. (<i>In partisan conditions, the governor was from the party opposite the one that passed the bill.</i>)	Compromise (equally important)

Inparty Advantage. To manipulate partisan interests, democratic violations also randomly differed in whether participants learned that the action would advantage, disadvantage, or neither advantage nor disadvantage the participants’ inparty. For example, for one Democratic respondent, the voter access vignette might have randomly been assigned to advantage the

³ Although scholars might not universally view the veto scenario as undemocratic, participants in the pilot (where no party labels were provided) most often rated it as “very undemocratic.”

⁴ Existing research suggests that vote-by-mail does not systematically benefit either party (e.g., Barber & Holbein, 2020). This framing was intended to reflect how such policies are often characterized in political discourse, rather than to reflect actual scholarly consensus.

inparty, including an explanation stating that “experts believe this policy would decrease the share of Republican votes in the next election.” Inparty advantage was also a within-subjects variable with three levels: inparty advantage, inparty disadvantage, and inparty neutral (see S4 for full item wording).

As described above, each participant saw one action that purportedly advantaged their inparty, one that disadvantaged their inparty, and one that advantaged neither party. The actions that corresponded to these explanations varied and were counterbalanced between participants. For example, one Democratic participant may have seen the voter access vignette, describing a governor shortening mail-in voting times to suppress Democratic turnout (Democrat-important; inparty disadvantage), the election security vignette, describing a governor ignoring warnings from the FBI that a radical organization intended to hack into newly implemented voting machines to cause chaos (Republican-important; neutral), and the compromise vignette, describing a Democrat vetoing a bill passed by the Republican legislature (both-important; inparty advantage). The design was therefore a partially crossed 3 (principle violated) $\times 3$ (inparty advantage/disadvantage/neutral) \times continuous (participant party) experimental design.

Party Affiliation. Political party affiliation was measured using a two-step process. Participants first identified as Democrat, Republican, Independent, or something else. Those selecting Democrat or Republican indicated whether they were slightly, moderately, or strongly affiliated. Independents and others were asked if they leaned Democrat, Republican, or neither. After excluding pure independents, party affiliation was recoded into an equal-interval, eight-point scale ranging from -1 (strongly Democrat) to 1 (strongly Republican), including those who leaned Democrat or Republican.⁵

⁵ Results remain substantively unchanged when excluding partisan leaners in both studies.

Perceived Democracy. Perceived democracy of each action was measured by asking participants, “How democratic or undemocratic is this policy/action?” (7-point bipolar scale, coded from -1 = very undemocratic to 1 = very democratic).

Perceived Fairness. A measure of rationalization by means other than regarding politically beneficial violations as more democratic was the extent to which participants perceived each action as fair. Participants were asked, “To what extent do you think this policy/action is fair or unfair?” (7-point bipolar scale, coded from -1 = very unfair to 1 = very fair).

Support/Opposition. Support/opposition of each action was measured by asking participants, “To what extent would you support or oppose this policy/action?” (7-point bipolar scale, coded from -1 = strongly oppose to 1 = strongly support).

Results

Actions in all three vignettes were opposed more than supported ($M = -0.51$, $SD = 0.58$) and perceived to be undemocratic ($M = -0.46$, $SD = 0.59$). Election security served as the reference category for the principle violated dummy codes, as it was the most opposed and least polarizing violation.

Main Analyses

To examine whether and why partisan asymmetry in support for democratic norm violations emerged, I estimated four hierarchical regression models, each including a random intercept for participant ID. Two models predicted support/opposition and two predicted perceived democracy. For each outcome, I first fit a model with main effects of inparty (dis)advantage, the principle violated, and party affiliation. I then added interaction terms

between each predictor and party affiliation to assess whether partisan asymmetries emerged beyond the effects of partisan interest or principle alone.⁶

In the main-effects-only models, Republicans were less opposed⁷ to democratic norm violations than Democrats and perceived them as less undemocratic, even after accounting for inparty (dis)advantage and the principle violated (see Tables 3 and 4). This pattern contradicts the *Bipartisan Rationalization Hypothesis* and aligns with prior work finding residual asymmetry even when partisan advantage is held constant (e.g., McCoy et al., 2020). Additionally, participants were less opposed to violations of voter access and compromise than violations of election security, and more opposed to violations that harmed their party, and less opposed to those that helped it.

To examine the source of the remaining asymmetry not accounted for by inparty advantage and principle violated, interaction terms between party affiliation and each predictor were added.

Table 3

Hierarchical random intercept model with unstandardized coefficients predicting support for democratic norm violations by party affiliation, principle violated, and inparty advantage.

Block	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% <i>CI</i>		<i>p</i>		<i>Semi-partial r</i> ²
			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>			
1							
Party ID (Republican)	0.17	.01	0.15	0.19	< .001	***	.051
Voter Access Violation (Dummy)	0.30	.02	0.26	0.34	< .001	***	.043

⁶ Although my pre-analysis plan specified mediation tests, I opted for parallel regressions instead, due to uncertainty about the causal relationship between perceived democracy and support. While the two are conceptually linked, it is unclear whether people support actions because they view them as more democratic, or whether they view actions as more democratic because they support them. Because the direction of influence between these variables cannot be established, I tested both outcomes separately rather than assuming a mediational pathway.

⁷ The measure of support/opposition is such that positive numbers indicate stronger support and weaker opposition. However, I primarily refer to higher numbers and positive relationships as indicating “weaker opposition” because participants rarely expressed support for actions. The same is true for the measure of perceived democracy.

	Compromise Violation (Dummy)	0.27	.02	0.23	0.31	< .001	***	.035
	Inparty Advantage (Dummy)	0.18	.02	0.14	0.22	< .001	***	.016
	Inparty Disadvantage (Dummy)	-0.15	.02	-0.19	-0.11	< .001	***	.012
							R^2_{Main}	.158***
2	Voter Access x Party ID	0.36	.03	0.30	0.42	< .001	***	.039
	Compromise x Party ID	0.07	.03	0.01	0.13	.010	*	.001
	Inparty Advantage x Party ID	0.07	.03	0.01	0.13	.013	*	.001
	Inparty Disadvantage x Party ID	-0.09	.03	-0.15	-0.03	< .001	***	.002
							$R^2_{\text{Interactions}}$.209***
							ΔR^2	.051***

Note. B denotes unstandardized coefficients from a hierarchical linear model with a random intercept for participant. All variables are scaled from 0 to 1. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Confidence intervals represent the 95% confidence interval for each coefficient. Semi-partial r^2 values reflect unique variance explained by each predictor.

Table 4

Hierarchical random intercept model with unstandardized coefficients predicting perceived democracy for democratic norm violations by party affiliation, principle violated, and inparty advantage.

Block	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95% CI</i>		<i>p</i>		<i>Semi-partial r²</i>
			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>			
1							
Party ID (Republican)	0.18	.02	0.14	0.22	< .001	***	.055
Voter Access Violation (Dummy)	0.22	.02	0.18	0.26	< .001	***	.023
Compromise Violation (Dummy)	0.20	.02	0.16	0.24	< .001	***	.020
Inparty Advantage (Dummy)	0.05	.02	0.01	0.09	.048	*	.001
Inparty Disadvantage (Dummy)	-0.11	.02	-0.15	-0.07	< .001	***	.006

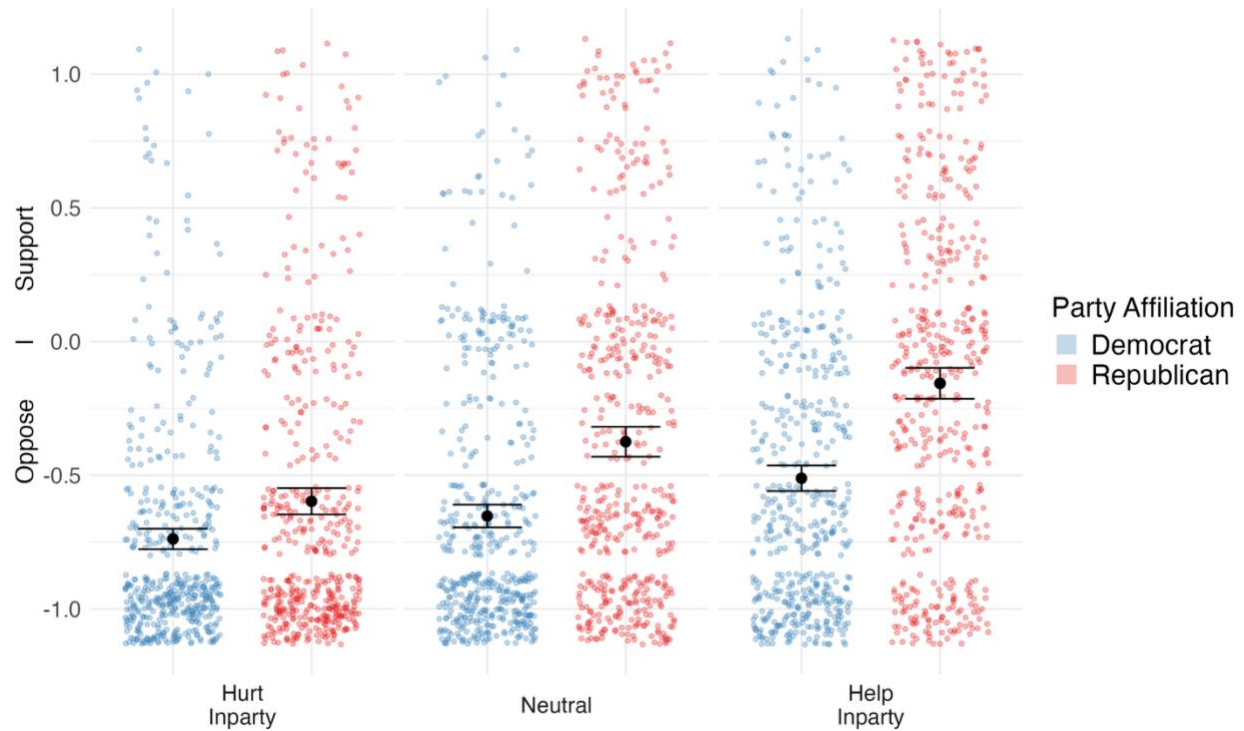
2	Voter Access x Party ID	0.24	.03	0.18	0.30	< .001	***	.017
	Compromise x Party ID	0.00	.03	-0.06	0.06	.92		.000
	Inparty Advantage x Party ID	-0.00	.03	-0.06	0.06	.94		.000
	Inparty Disadvantage x Party ID	-0.04	.03	-0.10	0.02	.17		.001
						$R^2_{\text{Interactions}}$.120***
						ΔR^2		.024***

Note. *B* denotes unstandardized coefficients from a hierarchical linear model with a random intercept for participant. All variables are scaled from 0 to 1. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Confidence intervals represent the 95% confidence interval for each coefficient. Semi-partial r^2 values reflect unique variance explained by each predictor.

As shown by the interaction terms in Tables 3 and 4, partisan differences in the influence of inparty advantage and disadvantage emerged for support, but not for perceived democracy. Simple slopes confirmed that Republicans were more supportive of advantageous violations (vs. neutral) than Democrats were (Republicans: $b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.17, 0.29], $p < .001$; Democrats: $b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.19], $p < .001$), and less supportive of disadvantageous violations than Democrats (Republicans: $b = -0.23$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [-0.29, -0.17], $p < .001$; Democrats: $b = -0.09$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [-0.15, -0.03], $p = .002$; see Figure 1). However, there was no evidence that Republicans were more likely than Democrats to rationalize these violations as more democratic, a pattern consistent with the *Asymmetric Commitment Hypothesis* and inconsistent with the *Asymmetric Rationalization Hypothesis* (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

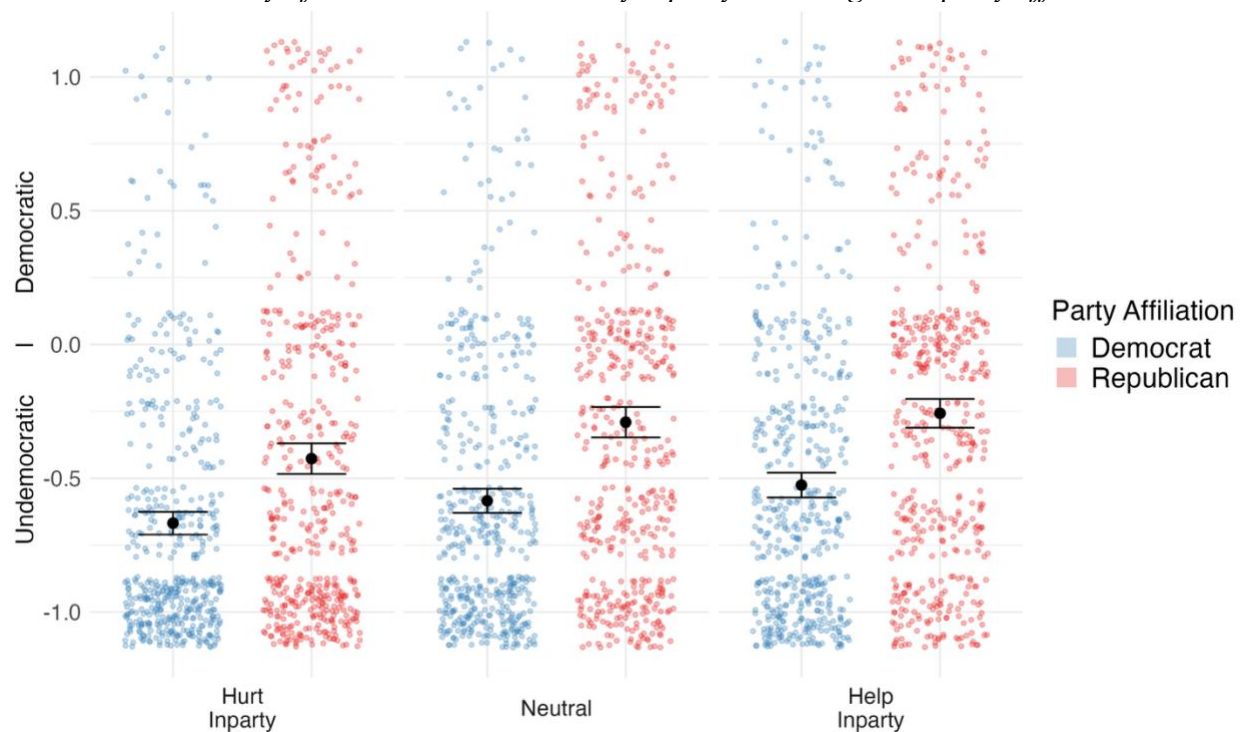
Levels of support/opposition for undemocratic actions by inparty advantage and party affiliation.



Note. Support/opposition ranged from -1 (strongly oppose) to 1 (strongly support), with 0 as neutral. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals for mean support/opposition at each level of inparty advantage by party.

Figure 2

Perceived democracy of undemocratic actions by inparty advantage and party affiliation.



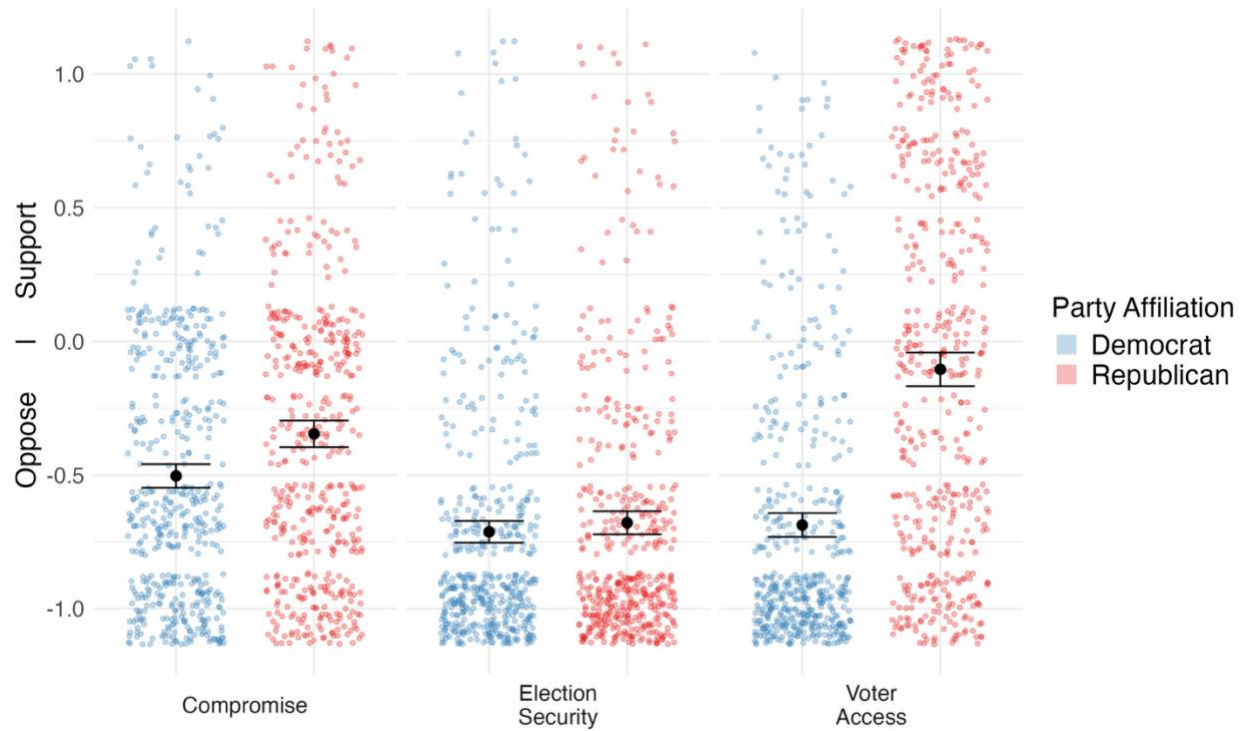
Note. Perceived democracy ranged from -1 (very undemocratic) to 1 (very democratic), with 0 as neutral. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals for mean perceived democracy at each level of inparty advantage by party.

Although partisan differences did not emerge in perceived democracy, exploratory analyses revealed asymmetries in perceived fairness. Republicans were more likely than Democrats to view politically advantageous violations as fair and politically disadvantageous ones as unfair (see S5). In other words, Republicans' greater receptiveness to norm violations that benefited their party *was* accompanied by greater rationalization, but through perceived fairness, not democratic legitimacy. Although this pattern remains consistent with the *Asymmetric Commitment Hypothesis*, it suggests that Republicans may rationalize such actions using other means.

Principled Differences. Even after accounting for partisan advantage (and for partisan differences in how (dis)advantage shaped responses) Republicans remained less opposed to both the voter access and compromise violations than Democrats (see Figure 3). However, partisan differences in perceived democracy only emerged in the domain of voter access. Simple slopes revealed that Democrats viewed the voter access violation similarly to the election security violation ($b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI $[-0.03, 0.09]$, $p = .29$), while Republicans were substantially less opposed ($b = 0.59$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI $[0.53, 0.65]$, $p < .001$). This asymmetry in support was accompanied by asymmetry in perceived democratic legitimacy: Republicans saw the voter access violation as much less undemocratic than Democrats did (Republicans: $b = 0.42$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI $[0.35, 0.48]$, $p < .001$; Democrats: $b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI $[-0.02, 0.10]$, $p = .20$), suggesting a principled asymmetry in how each party evaluates access-related democratic violations.

Figure 3

Levels of support/opposition for undemocratic actions by principle violated and party affiliation.



Note. Support/opposition ranged from -1 (strongly oppose) to 1 (strongly support), with 0 as neutral. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals for mean support/opposition by party and violation type.

A smaller partisan gap in support emerged for compromise violations (Democrats: $b = 0.22$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.27], $p < .001$; Republicans: $b = 0.32$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.26, 0.38], $p < .001$), but no significant partisan difference appeared in perceived democracy. That is, Republicans may have been more accepting of compromise violations than Democrats but did not differ in how democratic or undemocratic they found those actions. Importantly, the party \times compromise interaction was considerably smaller than the party \times voter access interaction. That is, interactions with principle violated were mostly consistent with the *Principled Asymmetry Hypothesis*.

The interaction between party and voter access was larger than both interactions with inparty (dis)advantage combined. This suggests that while both parties do engage in motivated reasoning when evaluating violations that benefit their side, differences in how partisans evaluate

specific principles and practices, independent of partisan advantage, may be especially important in shaping tolerance for democratic backsliding.

Finally, once interactions with party affiliation were accounted for, the main effect of party affiliation disappeared. In other words, asymmetries in support and perceived democracy were fully explained by how partisans differentially responded to the principles at stake and to partisan advantage.

Taken together, these results support the *Asymmetric Commitment* and *Principled Asymmetry Hypotheses*, while offering no support for the *Bipartisan* or *Asymmetric Rationalization Hypotheses*.

Study 1 Discussion

Study 1 primarily supported both the *Principled Asymmetry Hypothesis* and the *Asymmetric Commitment Hypothesis*. Although Democrats and Republicans agreed that some violations were worse than others, important asymmetries also emerged. Both groups were less opposed to violations that benefited their own party, but this pattern was more pronounced among Republicans: their opposition depended more strongly on whether the violation advantaged or disadvantaged their political inparty.

Notably, the partisan asymmetry in support was not mirrored in perceived democratic legitimacy. That is, although Republicans were more willing to support norm violations that benefited their party, they were not more likely than Democrats to view those violations as democratic. This pattern suggests that partisan asymmetry in motivated support stems more from a greater willingness to tolerate undemocratic behavior when politically beneficial than from stronger democratic rationalization, consistent with the *Asymmetric Commitment Hypothesis*.

Even stronger asymmetries emerged in responses to different democratic principles. The clearest asymmetry appeared in reactions to restrictions on vote-by-mail, the violation of the voter access principle in this study. Whereas Democrats opposed these restrictions as strongly as they opposed election security violations, Republicans, on average, expressed ambivalence. This pattern supports the *Principled Asymmetry Hypothesis*: Republicans and Democrats may differ in how strongly they value voter access as a core democratic principle (Slater, 2022).

A key limitation of Study 1, however, is that it tested only one type of voter access violation—restricting vote-by-mail. It is therefore unclear whether the principled asymmetry observed reflects broader partisan differences in commitment to the principle of voter access, or narrower disagreement about vote-by-mail specifically (Claassen et al., 2024). Moreover, it is unclear whether Republicans’ greater responsiveness to partisan advantage reflects a general pattern or is limited to particular kinds of violations. Study 2 addresses both questions by testing a different voter access scenario and a different type of democratic norm violation using a between-subjects design.

Study 2

Study 2 tested the generalizability of the asymmetries observed in Study 1 across two new democratic norm violations. The first scenario involved the removal of voting machines in specific areas—a different voter access restriction. The second involved a political protections violation, in which certain ideological groups were prohibited from running for office. These scenarios allowed for a broader test of whether principled asymmetry and asymmetric commitment extend beyond vote-by-mail and compromise violations. Study 2 used a fully between-subjects design such that each participant saw only one violation in one partisan context.

Method

Participants

The sample size for Study 2 was determined by external constraints, as it was part of a larger survey. A total of 1,572 participants were recruited via Lucid-Cint between May 5th and June 10th, 2024. Participants who failed either of two attention checks, along with two cases with missing data and 198 independents, were excluded, leaving a final sample of 1,372 participants (58% Democrats, 42% Republicans). Partisan leaners were retained.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to over 65, with 20% aged 18-29, 26% aged 30-44, 32% aged 45-64, and 22% aged 65 and older. Gender distribution was 51% female. Racial composition was 8% Asian, 22% Black/African American, 10% Hispanic/Latino, 4% Native American, 1% Middle Eastern/North African, 1% Pacific Islander, and 64% White.

Design and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two vignettes:⁸ a voter access violation or a political protections violation (see Table 2). Each vignette varied randomly in whether the violation advantaged, disadvantaged, or had no impact on the participant's political party. After reading, participants responded to measures assessing support/opposition, perceived democracy, fairness, moral conviction, expected efficacy, intentionality, anger, and typicality (see S6 for analyses using alternative outcome variables and S7 for full wording).

Principle Domain. To test partisan asymmetry and Democrats' greater commitment to voter access, participants read one of two vignettes drawn from the pilot study: a political protections violation or a voter access violation. The political protections vignette (designating a

⁸ The study originally assigned participants to one of three undemocratic actions, but a coding error prevented full assignment to the third vignette, rendering it unusable. Participants assigned to the third vignette were excluded from demographics, analyses, and the reported sample size.

politically opposing extremist group as a terrorist organization and prohibiting its members from running for office) reflected a principle viewed as more important by Republicans but seen as similarly undemocratic by both parties in the pilot. The voter access vignette (cutting funding for election administration and shutting down certain voting locations) reflected a principle viewed as slightly more undemocratic by Democrats but less so than the voter access violation tested in Study 1.

Table 2

Vignettes used in Study 2.

Vignette	Principle Violated
Imagine that [Donald Trump/Joe Biden], if re-elected as president, proposed a policy designating the far-[left/right] group, [Antifa/the Proud Boys], as a terrorist organization and prohibiting its members from running for office. (<i>In the neutral version, the proposal targeted an unspecified radical partisan group and was introduced by a senator.</i>)	Political Protections (more important to Republicans)
Imagine a future [Republican/Democratic/[blank]] governor of your state cuts funding for election administration. This cut to funding would shut down voting locations primarily in areas where [Republican/Democratic/the opposing party's] voters live.	Voter access 2 (more important to Democrats)

Inparty Advantage. To manipulate partisan interests, the vignettes randomly varied between subjects in whether the action advantaged, disadvantaged, or had no impact on the participant's political party.

Party Affiliation. Party affiliation was measured differently than in Study 1 due to the collaborative nature of the survey. Participants first indicated whether they were Democrat, Republican, or Independent. Partisans were then asked whether they identified as strong or weak, while independents reported whether they leaned toward a party or remained independent. After excluding pure independents, responses were recoded on a six-point scale from -1 (strong Democrat) to 1 (strong Republican), including partisan leaners.

Perceived democracy, fairness, and support/opposition were measured using the same procedure described in Study 1.

Results

Actions in both vignettes were considered undemocratic ($M = -0.29$, $SD = 0.66$) and opposed more than supported ($M = -0.29$, $SD = 0.65$). Among the two, the voter access violation was judged as less democratic and elicited stronger opposition than the violation of political protections.

As in Study 1, I tested each hypothesis using four hierarchical regression models—two predicting support/opposition and two predicting perceived democracy. For each outcome, the first model included only main effects; the second added interactions between each predictor and party affiliation. Unlike Study 1, the design was fully between-subjects, so no random intercept for participant ID was included.

As shown in Tables 5 and 6 and Figures 4 and 5, both the type of democratic violation and whether the action helped or hurt the participant's political party influenced responses. Participants opposed the voter access violation more than the political protections violation and viewed it as more undemocratic. Politically advantageous violations were rated as more democratic and elicited less opposition than neutral violations; the reverse was true for disadvantageous violations. However, in contrast to Study 1, no main effects of party affiliation emerged.

Notably, no significant interactions appeared in predicting either support/opposition or perceived democracy. That is, once partisan advantage was accounted for, there were no partisan differences in responses to the two violations or in how partisan benefit influenced judgments.

This pattern—consistent only with the *Bipartisan Rationalization Hypothesis*—suggests a boundary condition for the principled and commitment-based asymmetries observed in Study 1.

Table 5

Hierarchical regression model with unstandardized coefficients predicting support for democratic norm violations by party affiliation, principle violated, and inparty advantage.

Block	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% <i>CI</i>		<i>p</i>		Semi-partial <i>r</i> ²
			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>			
1							
Party ID (Republican)	-0.02	0.02	-0.06	0.02	0.26		0.00
Voter Access Violation (Dummy)	-0.38	0.03	-0.44	-0.31	< .001	***	0.09
Inparty Advantage (Dummy)	0.25	0.04	0.18	0.33	< .001	***	0.03
Inparty Disadvantage (Dummy)	-0.15	0.04	-0.22	-0.07	< .001	***	0.01
					<i>R</i> ² _{Main}		.157***
2							
Voter Access x Party ID	0.00	0.04	-0.08	0.08	0.94		0.00
Inparty Advantage x Party ID	0.02	0.05	-0.07	0.12	0.62		0.00
Inparty Disadvantage x Party ID	-0.01	0.05	-0.11	0.09	0.83		0.00
					<i>R</i> ² _{Interactions}		.158***
					ΔR^2		.001

Note. *B* denotes unstandardized coefficients from a hierarchical regression model. All variables are scaled from 0 to 1. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Confidence intervals represent the 95% confidence interval for each coefficient. Semi-partial r^2 values reflect unique variance explained by each predictor.

Table 6

Hierarchical regression model with unstandardized coefficients predicting perceived democracy of democratic norm violations by party affiliation, principle violated, and inparty advantage.

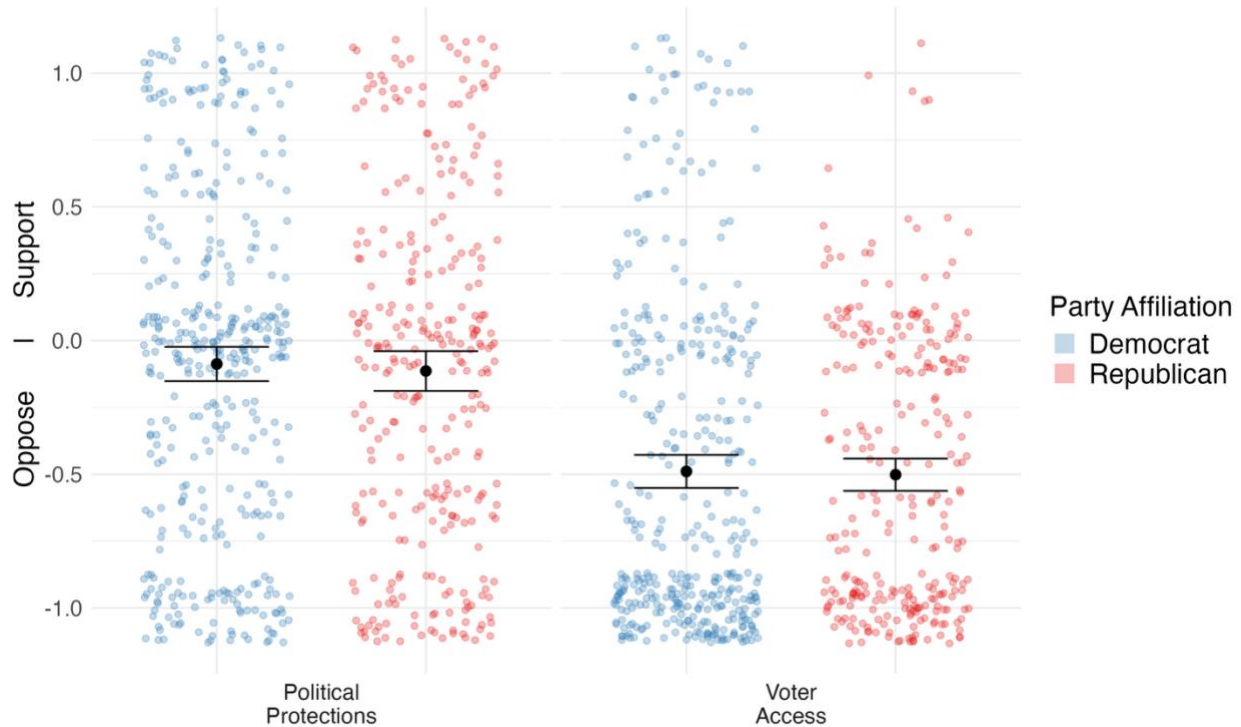
Block	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% <i>CI</i>		<i>p</i>		Semi-partial <i>r</i> ²
			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>			
1							
Party ID (Republican)	-0.01	0.02	-0.05	0.03	0.54		0.00
Voter Access Violation (Dummy)	-0.28	0.03	-0.35	-0.22	< .001	***	0.05

	Inparty Advantage (Dummy)	0.12	0.04	0.04	0.20	0.003	**	0.01
	Inparty Disadvantage (Dummy)	-0.16	0.04	-0.24	-0.07	< .001	***	0.01
		R^2_{Main}						.079***
2	Voter Access x Party ID	0.01	0.04	-0.08	0.09	0.88		0.00
	Inparty Advantage x Party ID	-0.05	0.05	-0.15	0.05	0.37		0.00
	Inparty Disadvantage x Party ID	0.08	0.05	-0.02	0.19	0.12		0.00
		$R^2_{\text{Interactions}}$.081***
		ΔR^2						.002

Note. B denotes unstandardized coefficients from a hierarchical regression model. All variables are scaled from 0 to 1. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Confidence intervals represent the 95% confidence interval for each coefficient. Semi-partial r^2 values reflect unique variance explained by each predictor.

Figure 4

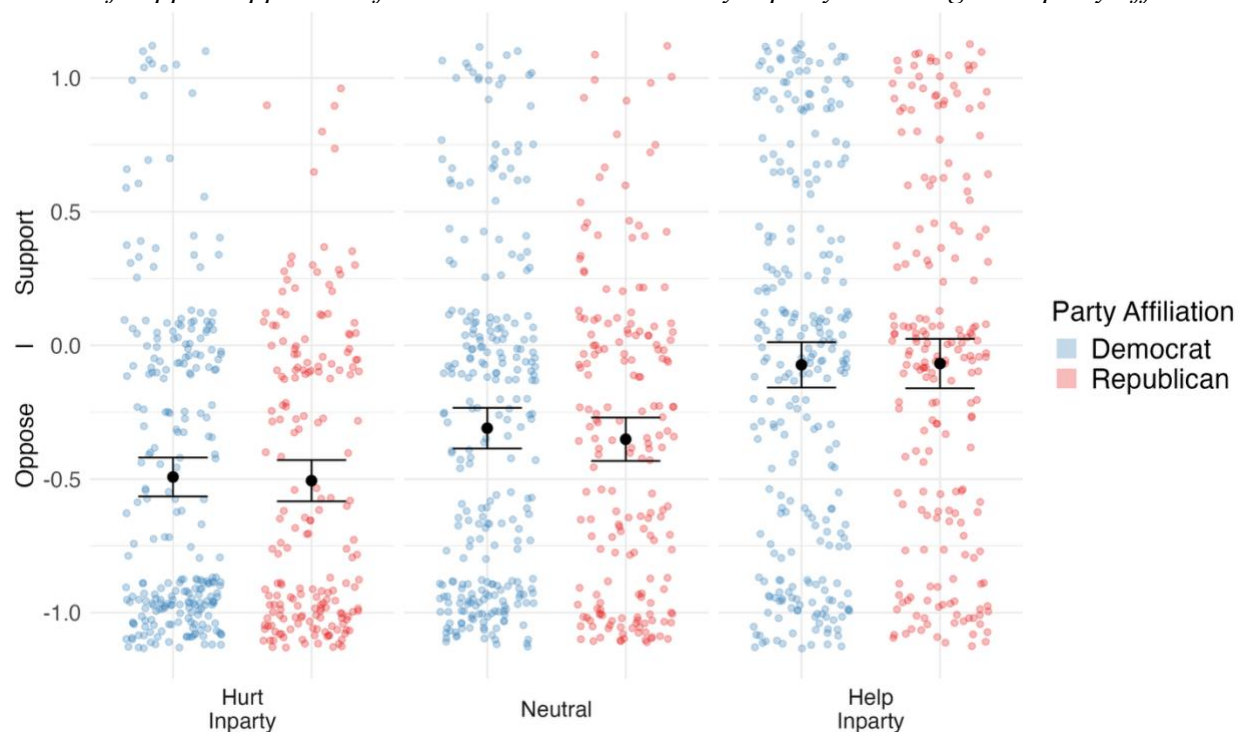
Levels of support/opposition for undemocratic actions by principle violated and party affiliation.



Note. Support/opposition ranged from -1 (strongly oppose) to 1 (strongly support), with 0 as neutral. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals for mean support/opposition for each violation type by party.

Figure 5

Levels of support/opposition for undemocratic actions by inparty advantage and party affiliation.



Note. Support/opposition ranged from -1 (strongly oppose) to 1 (strongly support), with 0 as neutral. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals for mean support/opposition at each level of inparty advantage by party.

In sum, whereas Study 1 supported the *Asymmetric Commitment* and *Principled Asymmetry Hypothesis*, results from Study 2 found no evidence of asymmetry beyond that which could be explained by partisan advantage, consistent only with the *Bipartisan Rationalization Hypothesis*.

Study 2 Discussion

Study 2 found no evidence of partisan asymmetry in support for or perceptions of democratic norm violations. Republicans and Democrats opposed the voter access violation more than the political protections violation and both were more supportive of violations that advantaged their party and more opposed to those that harmed it, viewing politically beneficial actions as more democratic. These findings support the *Bipartisan Rationalization Hypothesis*:

both parties justify norm violations in self-serving ways, producing symmetry when partisan advantage is held constant.

These findings also reveal important boundary conditions for theories of partisan asymmetry. Unlike Study 1, differences in opposition were fully explained by partisan advantage and perceived democratic legitimacy, with no residual asymmetry. Design differences are unlikely to account for this: supplementary analyses from Study 1 using only the first vignette seen by participants produced similar asymmetries.⁹ Rather, Study 2 suggests that asymmetries are not fixed, but issue-specific. Republicans' greater tolerance for vote-by-mail restrictions in Study 1 did not extend to polling place reductions, nor did their heightened sensitivity to partisan advantage reappear. Together, these results indicate that both principled and partisan-driven asymmetries depend on the specific violation—not on broad differences in democratic commitment.

General Discussion

This research has moved our current understanding of undemocratic support forward by testing when and why U.S. partisans differ in their acceptance of anti-democratic practices against their opponents. Consistent with prior work, both Democrats and Republicans across studies were less opposed to politically advantageous violations and more opposed to disadvantageous ones. Moreover, this varying support closely tracked participants' perceived democracy of the violations, consistent with prior work demonstrating that partisans justify anti-democratic, but beneficial actions by rationalizing them as more democratic (Krishnarajan, 2022). Thus, partisan differences can often be explained by which practices and violations

⁹ The party × (dis)advantage interactions were weaker and did not reach significance in these analyses, likely due to limited power from the reduced sample size. Notably, however, the larger interaction between party affiliation and the voter access violation remained significant (see S8).

temporarily confer partisan advantage. There are important exceptions to this pattern, however, which I discuss next.

Principled(?) Asymmetry

Even when controlling for partisan advantage, partisan differences remained in some cases. In Study 1, Republicans were less opposed to limiting mail-in voting and vetoing a popular bill, regardless of which party benefited. However, it may not be accurate to call these differences “principled” in the sense of reflecting consistent commitments to abstract democratic norms. For instance, while Republicans were less opposed than Democrats to restricting vote-by-mail (Study 1), the same pattern did not hold for a different voter access violation (removing polling locations) in Study 2. Similarly, although Democrats were more opposed to a governor vetoing a popular bill passed by the opposition, we cannot conclude they broadly oppose legislative obstruction more than Republicans without testing additional compromise violations.

Contradictory findings of partisan (a)symmetry as a function of the principle violated might indicate that asymmetries in opposition to democratic norm violations do not reliably map onto principled commitments to different democratic values. Rather, such asymmetries may reflect issue-specific considerations. Republican tolerance for vote-by-mail restrictions may stem less from a principled devaluation of voter access and more from concerns about the integrity of mail-in voting, which have been heavily politicized in recent years. This interpretation aligns with prior research showing similarly weak associations between abstract democratic values and opposition to specific undemocratic actions (Malka & Costello, 2023).

Asymmetric Commitment

Not all asymmetry reflected principled differences, however. Study 1 also found that Republicans’ support for democratic norm violations varied slightly more strongly based on

partisan advantage than Democrats', even though both viewed beneficial actions as more democratic. This asymmetry in support, but not perceived democracy, supports the *Asymmetric Commitment Hypothesis*. Republicans appeared more willing than Democrats to sidestep democratic concerns for partisan gain—but without the need to rationalize these actions as more democratic. Instead, Republicans' motivated support tracked more closely with perceived fairness.

This asymmetry did not generalize. In Study 2, no partisan differences emerged in the influence of partisan advantage on support or perceived democracy, indicating that Republicans' greater responsiveness to partisan advantage observed in prior research (McCoy et al., 2020) may be more context-dependent than previously thought. Interestingly, the asymmetric commitment effects appeared in the same issues as the asymmetries discussed above: mail-in voting, executive obstruction, and, additionally, election security. In other words, Republicans were not only less opposed to these violations overall but also more responsive to whether such violations helped or hurt their party. After ruling out differences in sample composition between studies,¹⁰ this pattern raises the possibility that partisan asymmetries were driven not by stable differences in democratic commitment, but by how Democrats and Republicans interpreted specific issues and the political context surrounding them.

Issue Salience and Elite Cues

Issue salience and elite cues at the time of data collection may help explain why certain democratic violations elicited asymmetric responses. For example, Republican elites—most prominently Donald Trump—repeatedly cast doubt on the integrity of mail-in voting (Levine, 2020; Rizzo, 2020) and accused Dominion Voting Systems of election tampering (McNamara,

¹⁰ Analyses indicated that Republicans and Democrats in Study 1 did not differ in levels of affective polarization or moralized political identity.

2020). These elite narratives may have done two things. First, they likely degraded the perceived legitimacy of specific practices—such as mail-in voting—leading Republicans to view restrictions on them as more acceptable, regardless of who benefits. Second, they may have normalized partisan maneuvering in these particular domains, fostering greater responsiveness to whether such violations help or hurt one’s party. Prior work supports this idea: Mann et al. (2020) found that when Democratic elites endorsed automatic voter registration, Republicans and Independents perceived the reform as more likely to reduce electoral legitimacy and fairness—whereas Democrats did not show the same pattern in response to Republican endorsements. Thus, elite cues may simultaneously weaken principled support and increase partisan rationalization—but only in issue areas that have been politicized.¹¹

This interpretation is also consistent with recent findings from Claassen et al. (2024), who manipulated partisan interests and found largely symmetrical patterns of partisan motivated reasoning—except when violations involved vote-by-mail. In that domain, Republicans were more responsive to partisan advantage than Democrats, which the authors attributed to increased polarization and elite-driven messaging around mail-in voting. The present research not only replicates this asymmetry but also extends it in two important ways. First, it shows that the asymmetry is not solely attributable to differential partisan motivated reasoning; Republicans were also less opposed to vote-by-mail restrictions regardless of partisan benefit, suggesting a broader skepticism toward the practice itself. Second, it clarifies the nature of the rationalization process: rather than viewing beneficial restrictions as particularly more democratic, Republicans

¹¹ Weaker Republican opposition to the veto of popular bills passed by the opposition party is more difficult to explain, but could potentially reflect broader partisan differences in support for legislative compromise and obstruction (Lovett, 2023)

justified them as fairer—indicating that rationalization may operate differently between parties depending on the context.

Strengths and Limitations

A central strength of this research was the testing of competing hypotheses about when and why partisan asymmetries in support for democratic norm violations emerge. By experimentally manipulating both the principle violated and the partisan implications of each violation, the studies offered a strong test (Platt, 1964) of whether partisan differences reflect differences in principles, rationalization, or democratic commitment.

Another strength was the inclusion of measures tapping both support and perceived democratic legitimacy. Doing so made it possible to disentangle whether partisan differences in support for norm violations stemmed from outright acceptance of democratic subversion, rationalization of beneficial violations as more democratic, or rationalization by other means (see Biggers & Bowler, 2022 for a similar point). For instance, Republicans' greater responsiveness to partisan advantage in Study 1 was not explained by differences in perceived democracy, but rather by differences in perceived fairness. By implication, fairness-based appeals may sometimes become psychologically entangled with partisan interest, weakening their normative force (Biggers & Bowler, 2023).

A potential limitation is the narrow scope of tested scenarios. However, these scenarios were sufficient to reveal clear patterns in partisan attitudes toward undemocratic actions. For instance, systematically investigating two different violations of voter access was sufficient to demonstrate that asymmetry—even in perceptions of voter access violations—appears to be issue-specific rather than reflecting broad principles, countering Slater (2022). Whereas other studies have documented generally symmetric patterns of PMR in response to partisan advantage

(e.g., Graham & Svolik, 2020), the present work shows how these patterns break down under specific conditions.

One could argue that partisan differences may reflect divergent interpretations of the scenarios rather than differing attitudes toward democracy. However, a pilot study asked participants to categorize the core democratic principle violated in each vignette. Across all vignettes, respondents from both parties most often identified the intended principle, reducing the likelihood that partisan differences in support were driven by misinterpretation.

Finally, while the control conditions were designed to be politically neutral, participants may still have inferred partisan implications in some cases. The pilot study, however, found that most respondents—across all vignettes—judged the neutral conditions as benefiting neither party. This pattern held for the mail-in voting scenario, though some respondents viewed it as more favorable to Republicans. Crucially, even after controlling for perceived beneficiary, partisan differences in perceived democracy of vote-by-mail limitations remained. That is, partisan differences in perceptions of limitations to vote-by-mail were not merely a function of assumed partisan advantage.

Partisan Psychological Differences

These findings contribute to the broader debate about psychological differences between Republicans and Democrats in the United States. Contrary to perspectives that posit deep-seated psychological asymmetries between the parties—such as differences in authoritarian tendencies—my results reveal no evidence of fundamental psychological differences in how partisans approach democratic norms (see Kteily & Brandt, 2025 for review). Both Republicans and Democrats engage in motivated reasoning, rationalizing norm violations when politically

beneficial, and both demonstrate a general opposition to breaches of democratic principles, regardless of partisan advantage.

The asymmetries that do emerge do not appear to be rooted in psychological differences but may instead result from shared psychological processes interacting with the political context. Both Democrats and Republicans engage in motivated reasoning, which can lead to divergent positions on democratic policies when these policies are perceived as favoring one party over the other. For differences not explained by partisan interests or motivated reasoning, the evidence points to context-specific factors—such as elite cues or time-specific ideological divides—rather than stable, inherent psychological traits.

Conclusion

Americans broadly support democratic principles like free and fair elections and equal voting access. When those principles are violated, however, partisans across the aisle tend to react in ways that serve their political interests. A consistent pattern across both studies was partisan motivated reasoning: Democrats and Republicans alike were more supportive of undemocratic actions that benefited their party and more opposed to those that harmed it, often justifying their stance by perceiving such actions as more democratic.

However, these symmetrical patterns were not universal. In Study 1, Republicans were more tolerant of certain violations—such as restricting mail-in voting or blocking popular legislation—regardless of partisan advantage. Moreover, they showed stronger responsiveness to whether such violations helped or hurt their party, even without a similar increase in democratic rationalization. These exceptions are important. Whereas motivated reasoning may be the default, political context and elite messaging can shift which norms are seen as legitimate and

which actions are viewed as “fair game.” The result is not just partisan rationalization, but selective erosion of democratic commitment depending on the issue.

In sum, we now know more than we did before about when and why U.S. partisans diverge in judgments of democratic norm violations. Although partisanship colors how Americans evaluate threats to democracy, the ways in which it does so are not fixed. Instead, they vary by issue, by framing, and by elite signals. At the very least, these findings suggest that public judgments of democratic violations are not wholly reducible to partisan self-interest. Even in a polarized era, partisanship does not fully dictate how Americans respond to threats to democratic norms.

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