

The Subversion Dilemma: Why Voters Who Cherish Democracy Vote it Away

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Abstract

Around the world, would-be authoritarian leaders have convinced their supporters to vote away the democracies they claim to cherish. How is this possible? We argue that simply fearing that opposing partisans support democratic backsliding can lead individuals to support it themselves. Would-be authoritarians may then be able to start a self-reinforcing dynamic of democratic backsliding by fostering these fears, which then generate exaggerated fears on the other. Using observational and experimental studies (N=4,400), we present four findings consistent with this account: Republicans and Democrats (1) overestimate opposing partisan willingness to break democratic norms; (2) will support their party breaking democratic norms themselves to the extent that they overestimate willingness by the other side; (3) that experimentally correcting this overestimation reduces support for breaking norms, and (4) increases the likelihood of voting for candidates that uphold democratic norms. Our findings suggest that we can foster democratic stability even in a highly polarized society using interventions that simply correct misperceptions about opposing partisans' commitment to democratic norms.

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1 Introduction

“Democrats are shredding the norms and institutions of our democracy with their full-blown resistance to @realDonaldTrump.” - Ronna McDaniel tweeting as @GOPChairwoman May 31, 2019

“Well, it’s official: Republicans are now arguing that the US isn’t (& shouldn’t be) a democracy. This is what they believe. From lobbyists writing their bills to sabotaging our civil rights, the GOP works to end democracy.” - Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tweeting as @AOC August 27, 2019

Around the world antidemocratic leaders are convincing their supporters to vote away the democracies they claim to cherish. Citizens in Venezuela, Turkey, and Hungary self-reported very high levels of support for democracy, even as masses of citizens supported the rise of authoritarian leaders Chávez, Erdoğan, and Orbán respectively (1, 2). How is this possible?

In this paper, we suggest a simple explanation. The norms that support democracy depend entirely on support for those norms by all sides. If partisans believe their opponents are preparing to defect from these norms, mutual fear may force them to subvert democracy first. Would-be authoritarian leaders, we suggest, may succeed in dismantling democracies by fostering these fears. When their supporters begin to fear defections by the other side, they become willing to tolerate antidemocratic steps by their party, which they see as leveling the playing field. These antidemocratic steps then set off fear in their opponents, placing them in the same dilemma in which they will bend the rules in an attempt to level the playing field. Once these mutual and exaggerated fears take root, they can be self-reinforcing and highly destructive, as each side has an incentive to preemptively defect from democratic norms before the other side preemptively defects.

We call this predicament the “Subversion Dilemma,” which has parallels in the “Security Dilemma” in the realist view of international relations (3, 4). Realists attribute the onset of interstate war to the fact that states in the international system exist in a state of “anarchy,” meaning they are not subject to any enforceable global government. Anarchy incentivizes State A to operate in “self-help” mode and arm itself against potential attackers. State B is likely to interpret this military buildup as a potential threat and is incentivized to increase its own military power. This cycle becomes self-reinforcing until one state inevitably chooses to take a preemptive strike rather than risk annihilation.

Unlike laws, the norms that support democracy within a state also lack external enforcement. Just as states may go to war due to the slippery slope of the security dilemma, citizens may lose democracy due the slippery slope of the subversion dilemma.

The subversion-dilemma argument builds on research showing that Democrats and Republicans tend to have negative and exaggerated misperceptions about each other (5–9), that partisans tend to form opinions of their opponents based on what they believe opponents think about them (10, 11), and that partisan views can be impacted by informational interventions (5, 8–10).

Across four studies, we test several (but not all) components of this theory. Studies 1a and 1b examine the prediction that partisans will overestimate the willingness of opposing partisans to break democratic norms and that this overestimation will be correlated with their own willingness to do so. Studies 2a and 2b use an experimental intervention to examine the prediction that correcting partisans’ exaggerated beliefs about opposing partisans’ willingness to subvert democratic norms will cause partisans to support norms and support candidates that strengthen democracy.

2 Exaggerated Fears (Study 1a)

To look for evidence of exaggerated fears that opposing partisans will break democratic norms and their consequences for respondents own likeliness to do so, we surveyed a demographically representative sample of 1,940 Democrats and Republicans recruited via Lucid on July 15-Aug 6, 2021. The survey was a preregistered replication of a preregistered pilot survey.

To assess people's willingness to subvert democratic norms, we presented participants with seven scenarios where they had to choose between actions that benefit their own party or actions that uphold democratic norms. Our list of norms was generated using insights from studies that identify norms that are widely held to be important to the American public, that are widely held to be important by political scientists, and that are often undermined in instances of democratic backsliding (12–14).

To assess fear of the other party's willingness to subvert, for instance, we ask a Democrat: "Do you think that MOST REPUBLICANS would support reducing the number of voting stations in towns that support DEMOCRATS?" To assess the respondent's own willingness to subvert, we ask: "Would YOU support reducing the number of voting stations in towns that support REPUBLICANS?" For each scenario, participants choose their response from a four-point Likert scale with options: "Never," "Probably Not," "Probably," and "Definitely." We take the simple average of these questions and rescale it 0-1.

We find major and symmetrical gaps in perception between partisans. Figure 1 presents the gap in perception between partisan beliefs about the other side's willingness to subvert democratic norms and partisan's own self-report, illustrating just how exaggerated these fears are.

While Democrats believe that Republicans will subvert democratic norms in nearly 70 percent of the scenarios (a mean of 0.67 on the 0-1 scale across the seven scenarios) while Republicans self-report willingness to subvert democratic norms in only about one quarter of the scenarios, (mean = 0.28). Republicans also believe that Democrats will subvert democratic norms in nearly 70 percent of the scenarios (mean = 0.66) while Democrats also self-report willingness to subvert democratic norms in only about one quarter of the scenarios (mean = 0.28).

The perception gap that we find is significantly larger than the important perception gaps that have been documented between partisans on issues of ideological and affective polarization (10, 11). To compare, we asked about respondents' own views and their perception of the other party on five ANES public policy questions. We also asked them to rate the other party and rate how the other party would see them on a single-item measure of blatant dehumanization. Partisans inaccurately perceive opposing partisans by an average of 0.09 on policy views and 0.14 on dehumanization, while they inaccurately perceive the other side's willingness to subvert democracy by 0.41, all on 0-1 scales.

3 Fear and Support for Backsliding (Study 1b)

If the subversion dilemma is at work, the second empirical regularity we should find is that fear of the other party should increase one's own willingness to subvert democracy. Using the same data as above, Figure 2 reveals support for this prediction. It shows a relationship between perceptions of the other side's willingness to subvert democracy and partisan's own willingness to do so. Compared to respondents who don't believe the other party desires to undermine democracy at

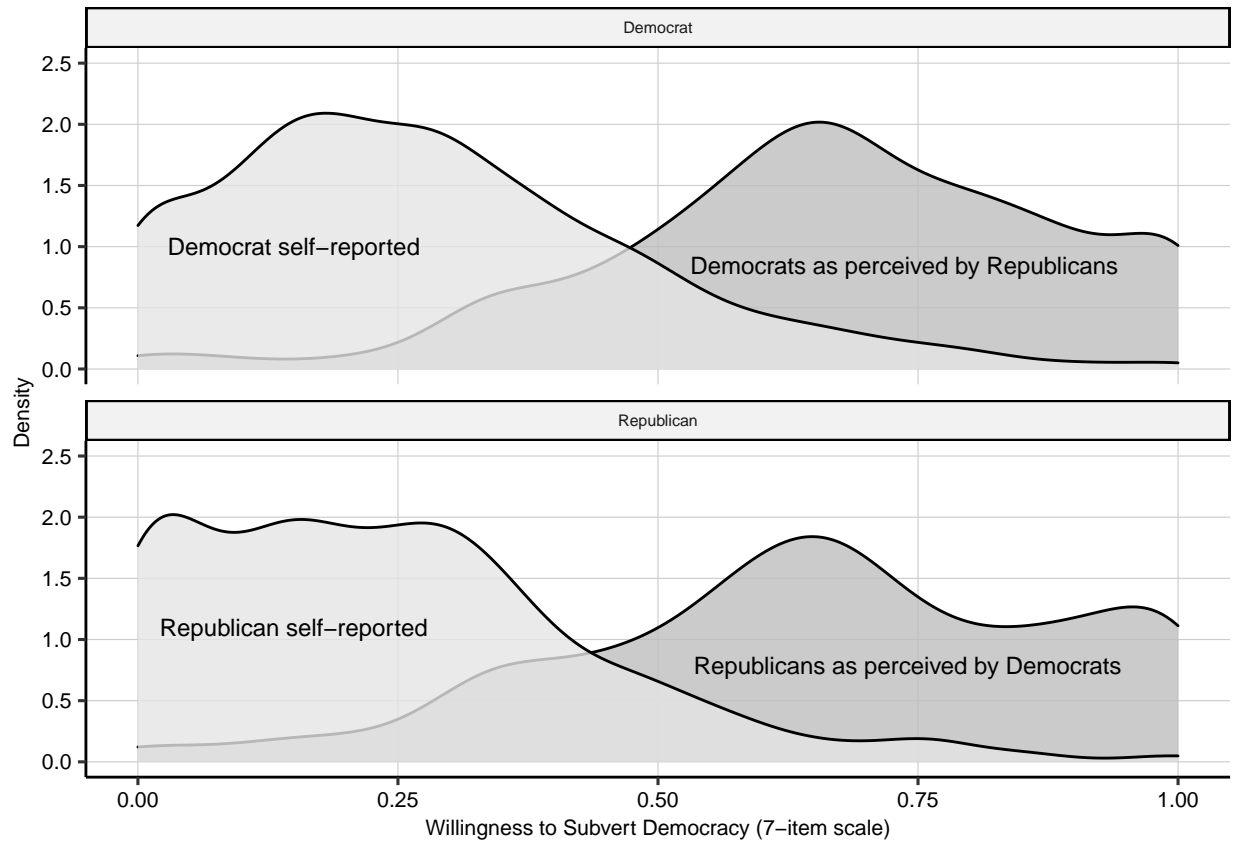


Figure 1: Exaggerated Mutual Fears. This figure shows that members of both parties fear support for subverting democracy by most members of the other party and these fears appear exaggerated.

all (0 on the scale), respondents who believe they are fully willing (1 on the scale) increase their own willingness to undermine democracy by about 0.25 on the 0-1 scale.

Correlations of course don't imply causation. We examine whether alternative explanations explain this association by adjusting for them statistically and also assess causation with an experiment. A number of alternatives seem plausible: strong partisans, respondents with extreme views on public policy, who believe the other party is extreme, who dehumanize the other party, or who believe the other party dehumanizes their party may be more likely to see the other party as supporting subversion and more likely to support it themselves.⁽¹⁵⁾ To measure these constructs, we included survey items about each one, including multi-item scales about policy views and about perceptions of the other party's policy views. In Table 1, we control for these variables and for demographics in a series of regression models but these controls leave the association in Figure 2 largely unchanged. We also address causation experimentally in the next section.

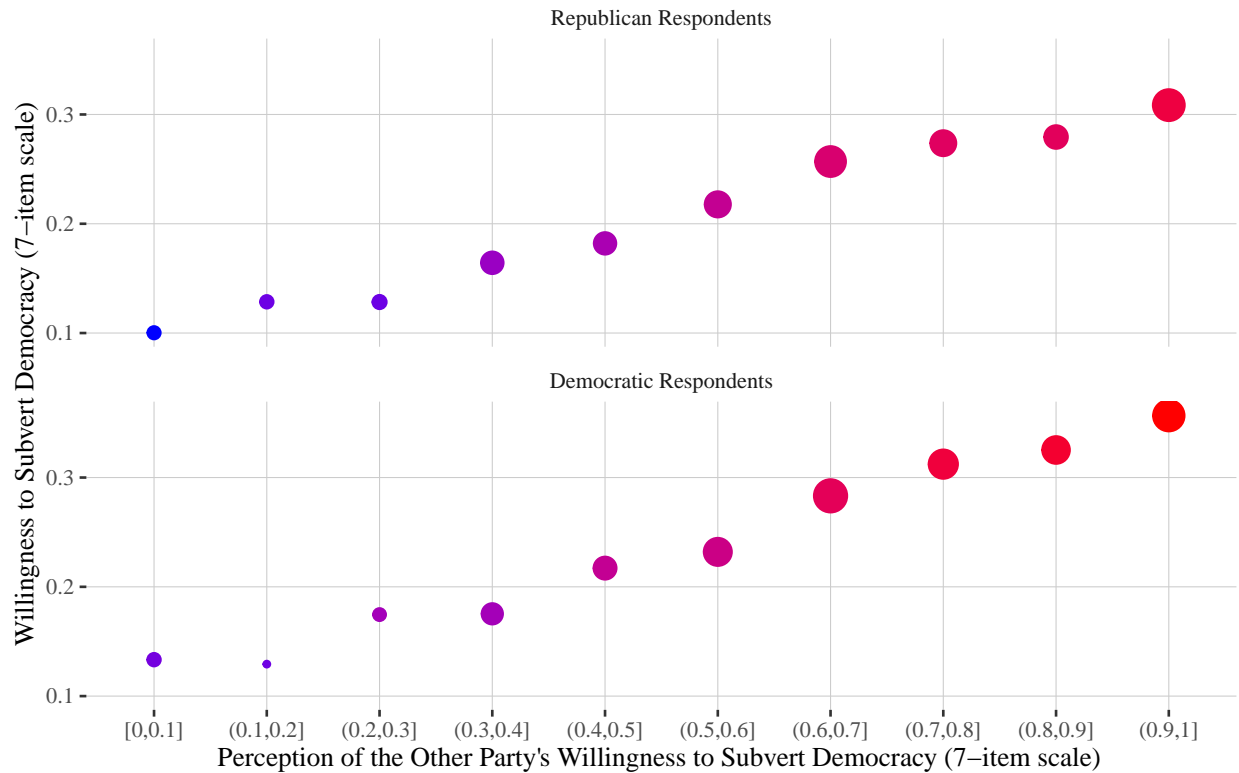


Figure 2: The figure shows that partisans support subverting democracy more when they think the other party's members support subverting it. Point size reflects the number of respondents and coloration reflects willingness to subvert.

Table 1: Explaining Willingness to Subvert Democracy. All variables coded 0-1 and rescaled so that higher values should be associated with greater willingness to subvert democracy.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Willingness to Subvert Democracy (7-item scale)			
	Republicans		Democrats	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Perception of the other party's willingness to subvert (7-item scale)	0.24*** (0.03)	0.23*** (0.03)	0.28*** (0.03)	0.27*** (0.03)
Party identification (folded)		0.04** (0.02)		0.02 (0.01)
Age		-0.06* (0.03)		-0.18*** (0.03)
Education		0.01 (0.02)		-0.02 (0.02)
Policy views (folded)		0.04 (0.04)		0.01 (0.04)
Dehumanization of other party		0.15*** (0.02)		0.09*** (0.02)
Perception of the other party's policy views (folded)		-0.21*** (0.04)		-0.07* (0.03)
Perception of the other party's dehumanization of your party		-0.09*** (0.02)		-0.05* (0.02)
Constant	0.08*** (0.02)	0.21*** (0.03)	0.09*** (0.02)	0.19*** (0.03)
Observations	912	912	1,028	1,028
R ²	0.09	0.19	0.09	0.16
Adjusted R ²	0.08	0.18	0.09	0.16
Residual Std. Error	0.19	0.18	0.19	0.18

Note:

* p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

4 Correcting Misperceptions and Support for Democratic Norms (Study 2a)

Finally, we examine whether we can correct these misperceptions and increase people's willingness to support democracy. We developed an "ask-tell" intervention(5, 8, 10) where we asked participants about the other party's willingness to subvert democracy in each of the seven scenarios and, after each question, gave treated respondents feedback on their answers. In this feedback, we told them the answers most opposing partisans actually selected in a previous survey, hence "ask-tell." The distribution of these Study 1 survey responses were "Never" to four questions and "Probably Not" to the remaining three for Democrats and "Never" to five questions and "Probably Not" to the remaining two for Republicans.

In a preregistered replication of a pilot experiment, we find that the "ask-tell" treatment appears to correct misperceptions, lowering partisans' perceptions that the other party is willing to subvert democracy. We conducted this study September 15-29 on a demographically representative sample of 2,645 from Lucid. We first asked two attention checks, then asked respondents about partisan identification, then administered the ask-tell treatment on the seven subversion items used above (the control group was simply asked about their perceptions), then asked about respondents on their own willingness to ask about democracy on these items. We told respondents We were interested in their perceptions of the other party and a probe at the end of the survey found no evidence that they suspected the purpose of this study.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of these perceptions for treatment and control conditions by party. Control participants have a mean perception of 0.63 on the 0-1 scale, while treated participants have a mean of 0.4 ($p=1.2e-157$). Although this result suggests that the treatment influences participant responses to the questions, how much of that change results from real belief change is hard to know.

Most importantly, correcting these misperceptions appears to rescue people, at least to some extent, from the subversion dilemma. The treatment group, we find, is less willingness to subvert democracy than the control group. Figure 4 shows this result, plotting the distribution of the willingness to subvert scale for those in the treatment versus control group. The control mean is 0.24, while treatment is 0.17, a highly statistically significant drop ($p=2.2e-16, df=2,186$). The decreasing willingness to subvert democracy in the treatment group corresponds to a drop from, say, "Probably Not" to "Never" on two of the seven questions. The mean subversion scores under treatment for Democrats (0.17) and Republicans (0.16) are indistinguishable. The treatment effect for compliers is -0.3, a large effect if we believe the exclusion restriction and other assumptions (see supplementary materials for details). We also find a statistically significant treatment effect for all seven individual items in the seven item self-subversion scale, all of a similar magnitude except for the violence item which is noticeably smaller (see Figure 4 in the supporting materials).

5 Correcting Misperceptions and Voting (Study 2b)

If fear of other party drives support for candidates who support subverting democracy, alleviating these fears should cut this support. Does it?

In exploratory analysis (not preregistered), we test this prediction by asking respondents to vote in two hypothetical primaries. Using the same data as study 2a, we examine the impact of the

treatment on voting decisions. In these primaries, respondents faced a choice between two candidates from their own party, one of whom was willing to subvert democracy and the other one was not. Respondents cast their votes in two such primaries. For each one, we randomly selected (without replacement) the type of subversion the candidates supported/opposed from the seven we had asked about earlier in the survey (reducing the number of voting stations in towns that support the other party, banning rallies, etc.). Since real-world candidates often justify subversions as protecting democracy from the other side subverting it, the subverting candidate justified their support on the grounds that they thought the other party supported subverting. After showing respondents the statements by the two candidates, we asked respondents whether they would vote for what we labeled as “Candidate A,” “Candidate B,” or “Neither” (randomly assigned for each respondent). To analyze this data, we code a subverting candidate vote to 1, “neither” to 0.5, and an anti-subversion candidate vote to 0 (the mean on the scale is around .24 for both parties). We also pool the analysis across respondents’ votes in both primaries and cluster the standard errors by respondent. Figure 5 shows that the treatment reduced support for the subverting candidate by about .03 on this 0-1 scale, an effect that is similar for Democrats and Republicans. The treatment effect for compliers is about .10.

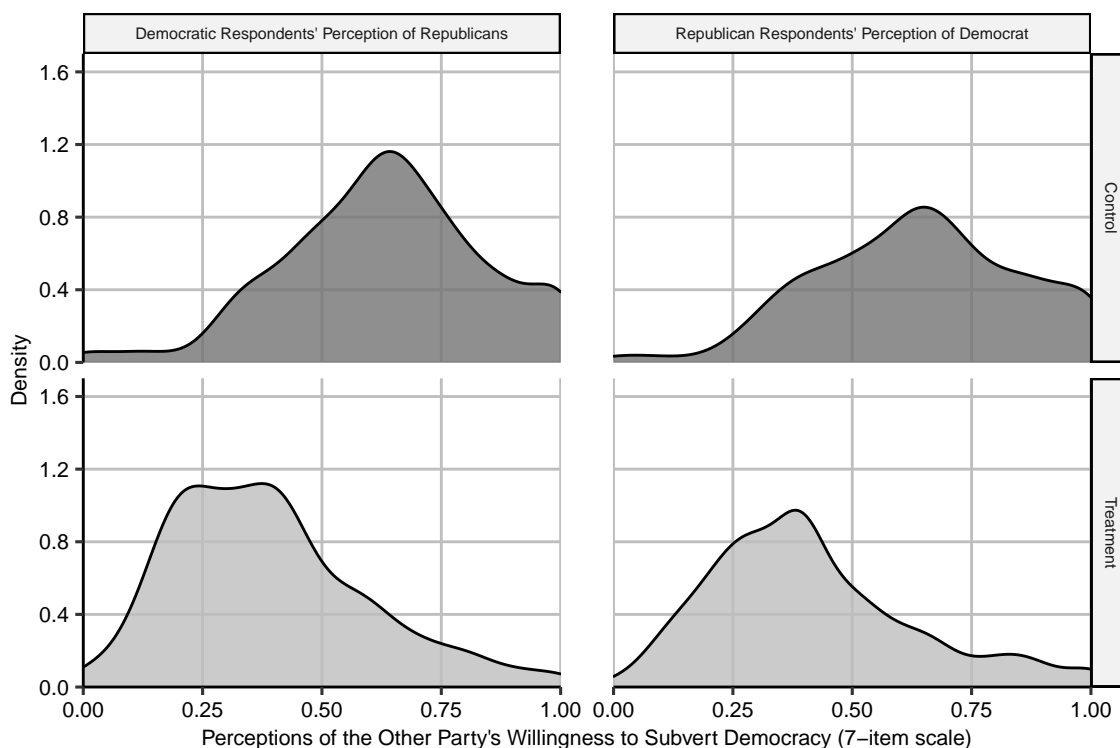


Figure 3: Reducing Mutual Fear—Experimental Manipulation Check. This figure shows that informing people that members of the other party don’t actually support subverting democracy changes perceptions, leading respondents to fear the other party less. Since the information was given in between each of the seven questions, this figure likely understates the actual treatment effect, since respondents hadn’t received the full treatment until they reached the seventh item.

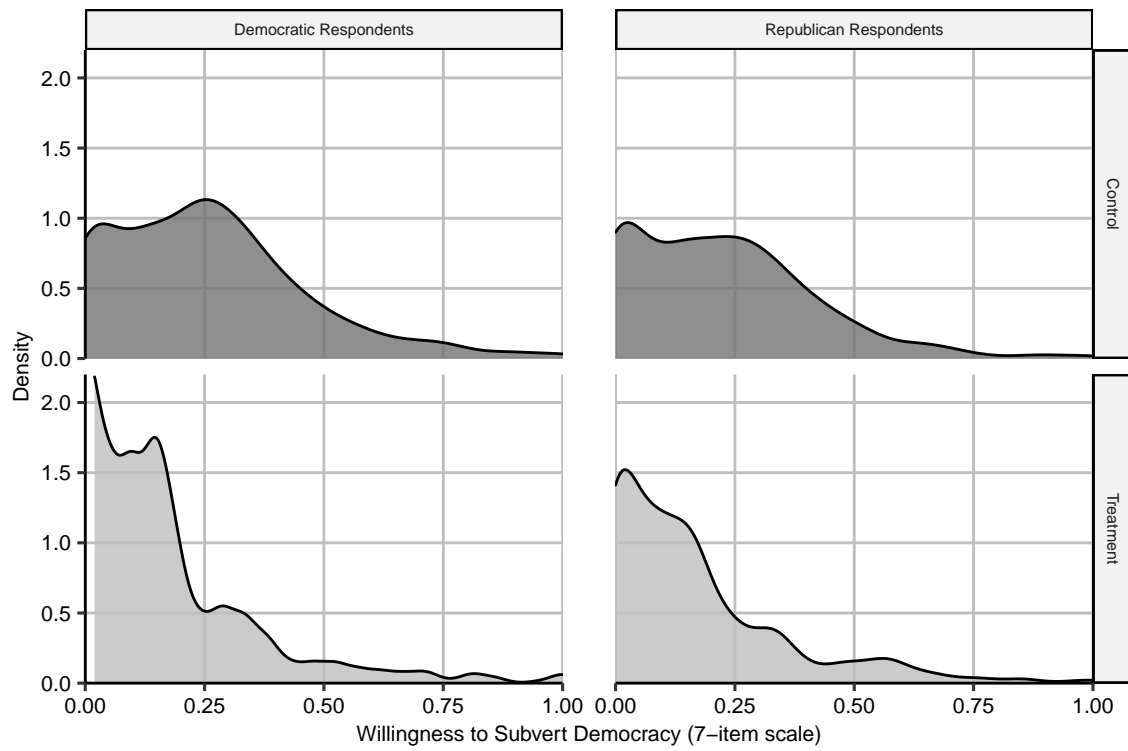


Figure 4: Experimental Effect. Correcting perceptions about members of the other party's willingness to subvert democracy, the treatment, decreases respondents' own willingness to subvert democracy.

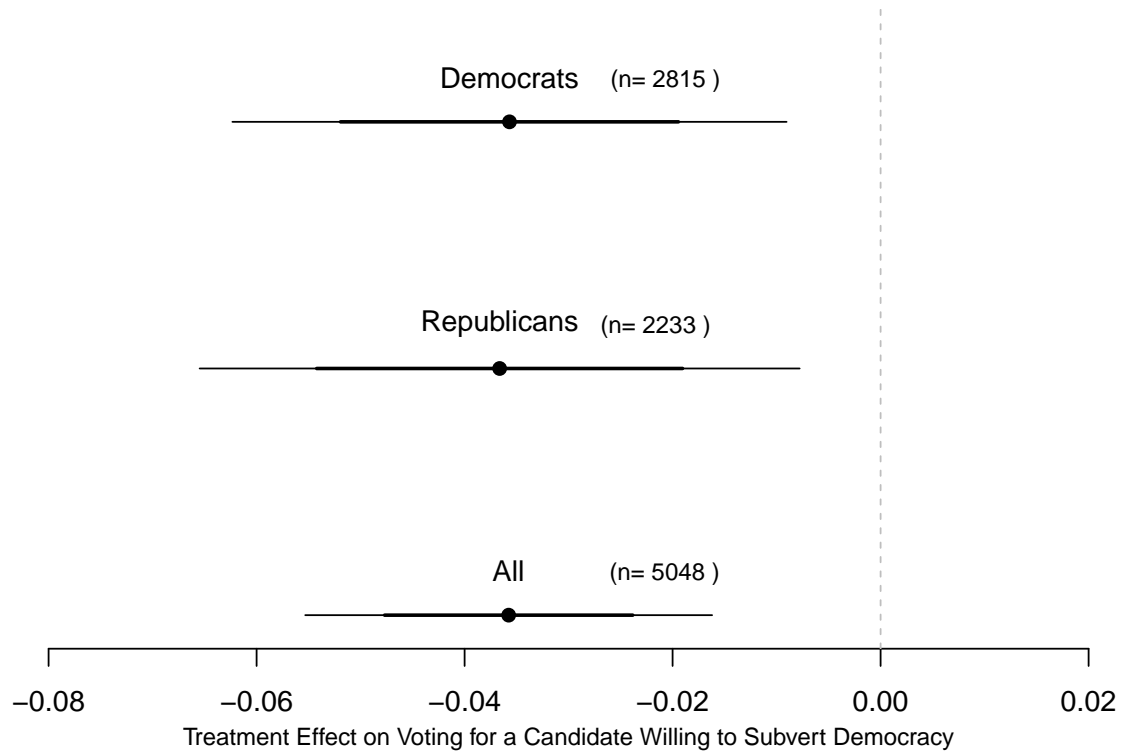


Figure 5: Treated respondents are less willing to vote for a primary candidate from their own party who supports subverting democracy. We code the dependent variable as subverting candidate vote 1, neither 0.5, and anti-subversion candidate vote 0 (the mean on the scale is around .24 for both parties). The Ns represent the total number of votes cast. Since respondents cast votes in two primary races, the number respondents is half the N (though some respondents only cast a vote in one). Each coefficient is from a separate regression and we cluster the standard errors by respondent.

6 Discussion

Taken together, these findings suggest an answer to the question of why voters may vote away the democracies they cherish. They do so because they fear their opponents are already dismantling it. They so fear, we suspect, because would-be authoritarians have stoked baseless fears, a claim not investigated in this paper, but one consistent with existing studies. Once these exaggerated fears take root in one party, we also suspect, they generate fears in the other through the dynamic we have called the subversion dilemma. This paper makes a contribution by showing that these exaggerated fears exist, that they cause people to be more willing to support subverting democracy themselves, and that correcting these perceptions can produce fear and reduce this willingness to defect from democracy.

An implication of these findings is that, to preserve democracy, leaders on both sides should consider signaling to the other side their willingness to follow the rules and norms of our democracy—including tolerating the other side (1). Costly actions may help convey that signal.

7 Citations

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Supplemental Materials

Studies 1a and 1b

The order of the questions is as follows. We first asked participants two attention checks and their party identification and excluded those who failed either or who didn't lean towards either party (true independents).

To assess people's willingness to subvert democracy, we asked Democrats and Republicans about seven scenarios where they had to choose between actions that benefit their own party or upholding the rules that govern our democracy, which we designed based on insights from other studies.^(12–14) In line with literature on democratic backsliding, these scenarios presented incremental breaks with these rules and were drawn from real-life examples. For example, we asked Democrats: "Would YOU support reducing the number of voting stations in towns that support REPUBLICANS?" The other six scenarios included banning rallies, ignoring controversial court rulings, freezing social media accounts, changing election laws, using violence, and reinterpreting the Constitution all to favor your party over the other party. For each scenario, participants choose their response from a four-point Likert scale with options: "Never," "Probably Not," "Probably," and "Definitely." We take the simple average of these questions and rescale it 0-1 (Cronbach's alpha 0.82).

To assess fear of the other party's willingness to subvert, we used the same scenarios but asked about the other party. For instance, we asked a Democrat: "Do you think that MOST REPUBLICANS would support reducing the number of voting stations in towns that support DEMOCRATS?" We take the simple average of these questions and rescale it 0-1 (Cronbach's alpha 0.89). We randomized the order of these two batteries.

To compare perception gaps, we asked about respondents' own views and their perception of the other party on five ANES public policy questions. We also asked them to rate the other party and rate how the other party would see them on a single-item dehumanization question. Partisans inaccurately perceive the self-reports of opposing partisans by an average of 0.09 on policy views, 0.14 on dehumanization, but 0.41 on willingness to subvert democracy, all on 0-1 scales.

Demographic information about the participants in this study can be found in XXX. Compared to the general population, the sample has slightly more female Republicans and slightly younger Democrats, while participants from both sides of the aisle are somewhat more educated than the general public. The magnitude and type of demographic differences do not seem to threaten the ability to make meaningful inferences about the main variables of interest.

Self-Reported Subversion Questions for Democrats

- Would YOU support banning FAR-RIGHT group rallies in the state capital?
- Would YOU support ignoring controversial court rulings by REPUBLICAN JUDGES?
- Would YOU support freezing the social media accounts of REPUBLICAN JOURNALISTS?
- Would YOU support reducing the number of voting stations in towns that support REPUBLICANS?
- Would YOU support laws that would make it easier for DEMOCRATS (and harder for REPUBLICANS) to get elected?

- Would YOU support using violence to block major REPUBLICAN laws?
- Would YOU support significantly reinterpreting the Constitution in order to block REPUBLICAN policies?

Self-Reported Subversion Questionnaire for Republicans

- Would YOU support banning FAR-LEFT group rallies in the state capital?
- Would YOU support ignoring controversial court rulings by DEMOCRAT JUDGES?
- Would YOU support freezing the social media accounts of DEMOCRAT JOURNALISTS?
- Would YOU support reducing the number of voting stations in towns that support DEMOCRATS?
- Would YOU support laws that would make it easier for REPUBLICANS (and harder for DEMOCRATS) to get elected?
- Would YOU support using violence to block major DEMOCRAT laws?
- Would YOU support significantly reinterpreting the Constitution in order to block DEMOCRAT policies?

Meta-Subversion Questionnaire for Democrats

- Would MOST REPUBLICANS support banning FAR-LEFT group rallies in the state capital?
- Would MOST REPUBLICANS support ignoring controversial court rulings by DEMOCRAT JUDGES?
- Would MOST REPUBLICANS support freezing the social media accounts of DEMOCRAT JOURNALISTS?
- Would MOST REPUBLICANS support reducing the number of voting stations in towns that support DEMOCRATS?
- Would MOST REPUBLICANS support laws that would make it easier for REPUBLICANS (and harder for DEMOCRATS) to get elected?
- Would MOST REPUBLICANS support using violence to block major DEMOCRAT laws?
- Would MOST REPUBLICANS support significantly reinterpreting the Constitution in order to block DEMOCRAT policies?

Meta-Subversion Questionnaire for Republicans

- Would MOST DEMOCRATS support banning FAR-RIGHT group rallies in the state capital?
- Would MOST DEMOCRATS support ignoring controversial court rulings by REPUBLICAN JUDGES?

- Would MOST DEMOCRATS support freezing the social media accounts of REPUBLICAN JOURNALISTS?
- Would MOST DEMOCRATS support reducing the number of voting stations in towns that support REPUBLICANS?
- Would MOST DEMOCRATS support laws that would make it easier for DEMOCRATS (and harder for REPUBLICANS) to get elected?
- Would MOST DEMOCRATS support using violence to block major REPUBLICAN laws?
- Would MOST DEMOCRATS support significantly reinterpreting the Constitution in order to block REPUBLICAN policies?

Self-Reported Policy Questionnaire for Democrats

- It is important for the government to provide many more services, even if it means an increase in spending.
- The government should spend much less money on defense.
- The government should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks.
- By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.
- There should be a government insurance plan which would cover all medical and hospital expenses for everyone.

Self-Reported Policy Questionnaire for Republicans

- The government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending.
- Government defense spending should be greatly increased.
- The government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves.
- By law, abortion should never be permitted.
- Instead of a government insurance plan, medical expenses should be paid by individuals, and through private insurance plans like Blue Cross.

Meta-Policy Questionnaire for Democrats

- MOST REPUBLICANS BELIEVE that the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending.
- MOST REPUBLICANS BELIEVE that government defense spending should be greatly increased.

- MOST REPUBLICANS BELIEVE that the government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves.
- MOST REPUBLICANS BELIEVE that, by law, abortion should never be permitted.
- MOST REPUBLICANS BELIEVE that, instead of a government insurance plan, medical expenses should be paid by individuals, and through private insurance plans like Blue Cross.

Meta-Policy Questionnaire for Republicans

- MOST DEMOCRATS BELIEVE that it is important for the government to provide many more services, even if it means an increase in spending.
- MOST DEMOCRATS BELIEVE that the government should spend much less money on defense.
- MOST DEMOCRATS BELIEVE that the government should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks.
- MOST DEMOCRATS BELIEVE that, by law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.
- MOST DEMOCRATS BELIEVE that there should be a government insurance plan which would cover all medical and hospital expenses for everyone.

Dehumanization Questions

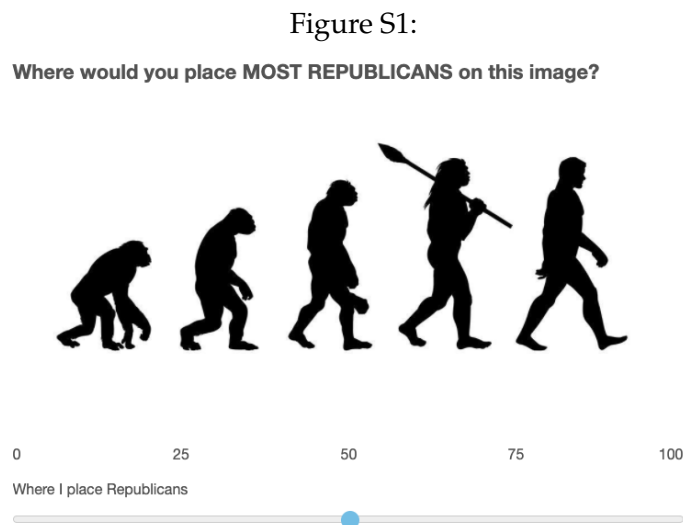


Figure S2:

Where would you place **MOST DEMOCRATS** on this image?

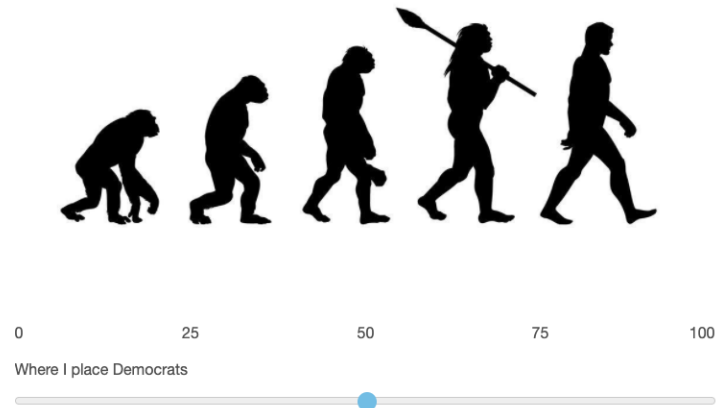


Figure S3:

Where do you think **MOST REPUBLICANS** would place **YOU** on this image?

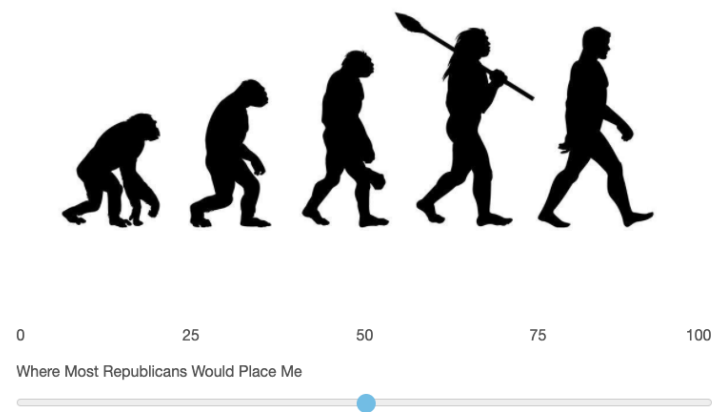
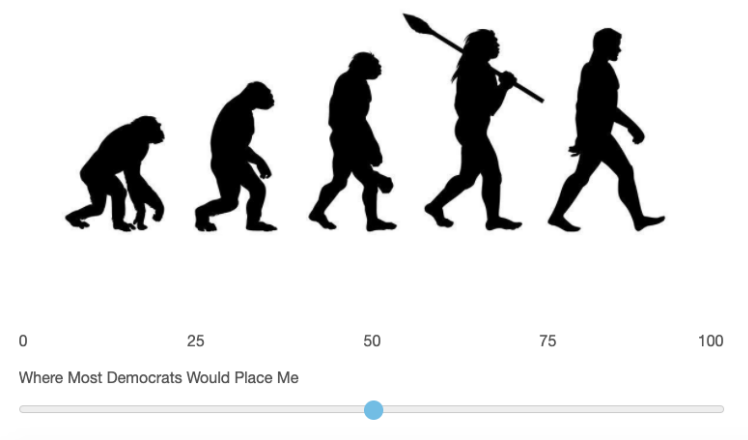


Figure S4:

Where do you think **MOST DEMOCRATS** would place **YOU** on this image?



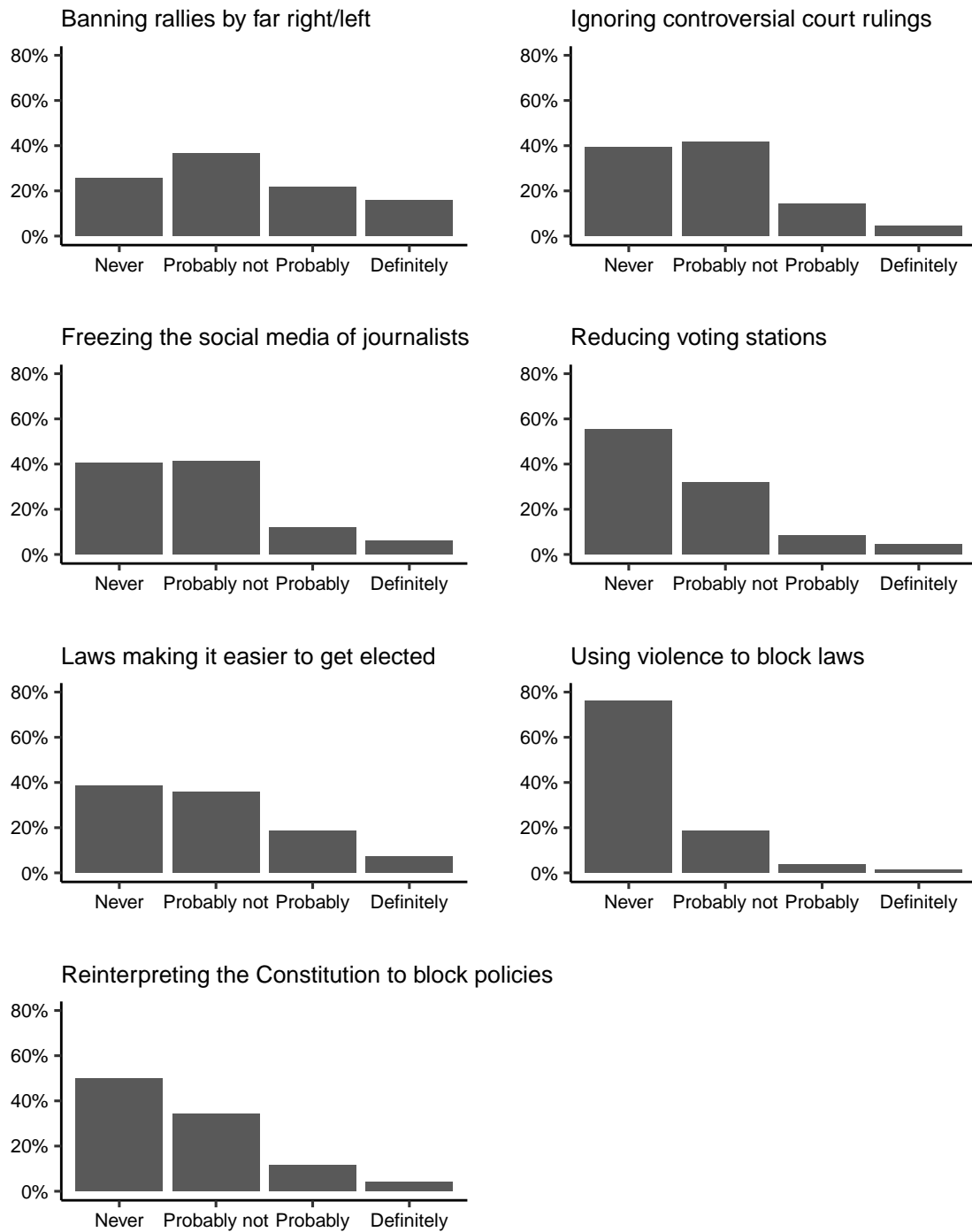


Figure S5: Response distributions for respondents' own willingness to subvert democracy in the seven scenarios in Study 1. Each question is phrased in terms of advantaging your party/disadvantaging the other party.

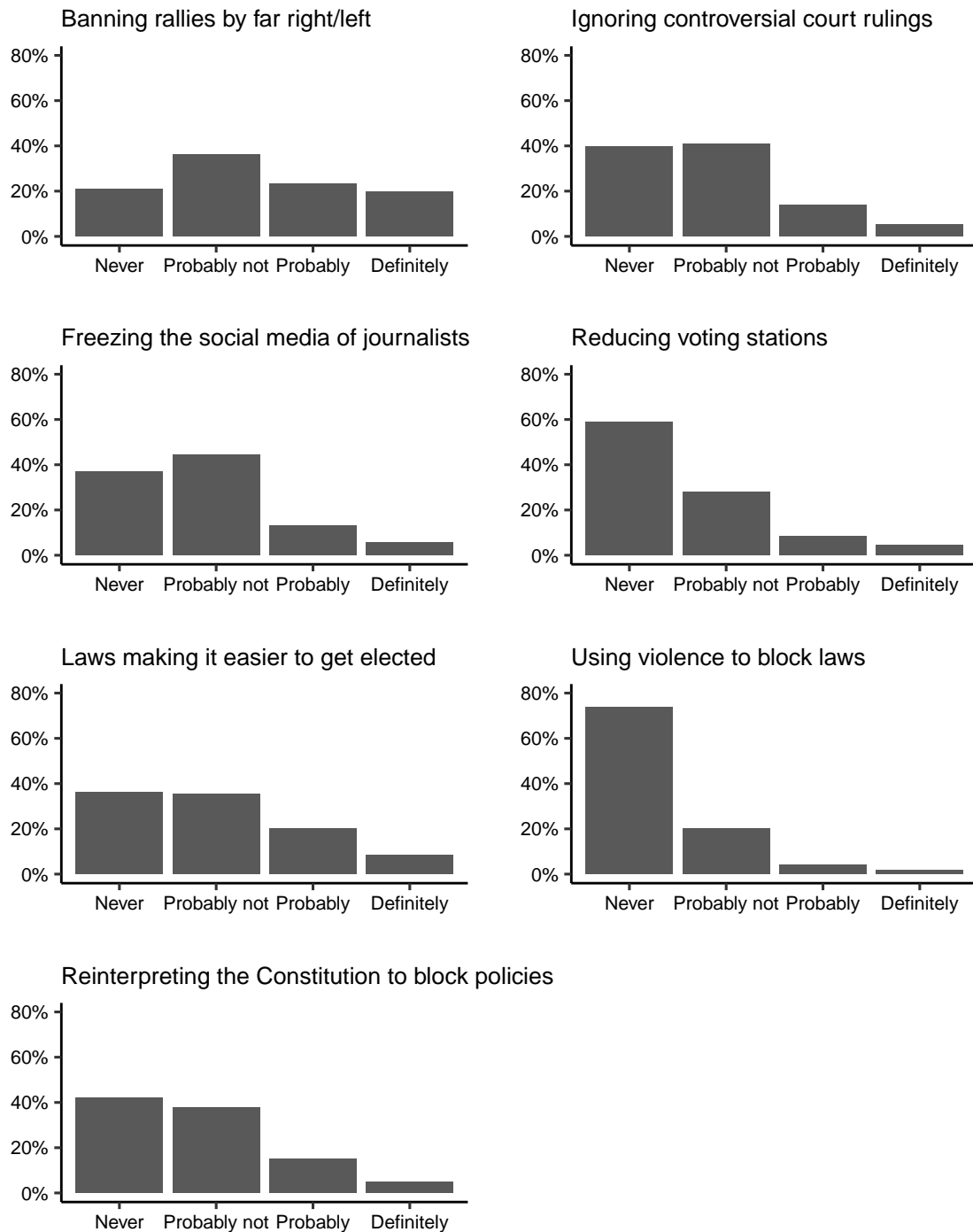


Figure S6: Response distributions for DEMOCRATS' willingness to subvert democracy in the seven scenarios. Each question is phrased in terms of advantaging your party/disadvantaging the other party in Study 1.

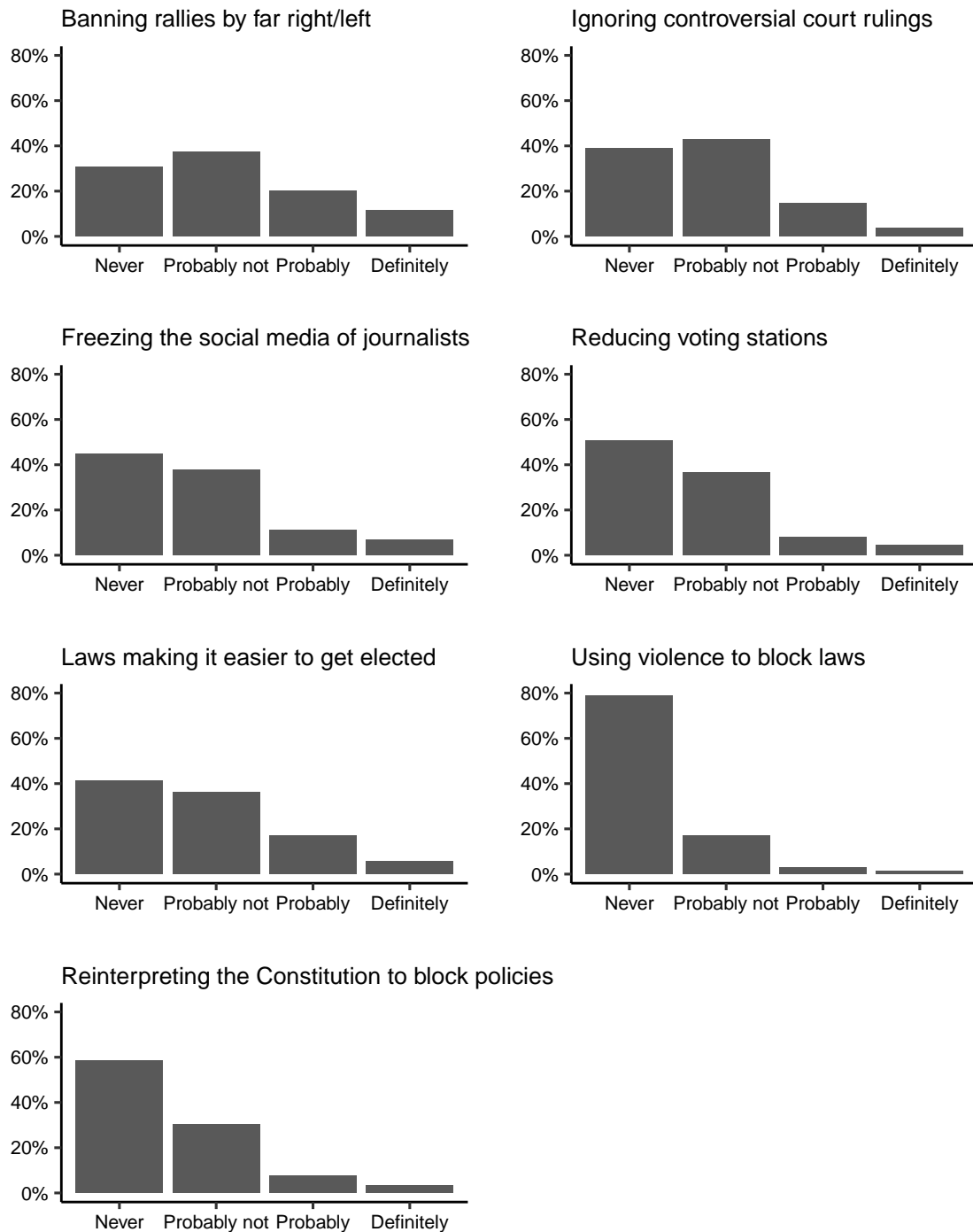


Figure S7: Response distributions for REPUBLICANS' willingness to subvert democracy in the seven scenarios. Each question is phrased in terms of advantaging your party/disadvantaging the other party in Study 1.

Studies 2a and 2b

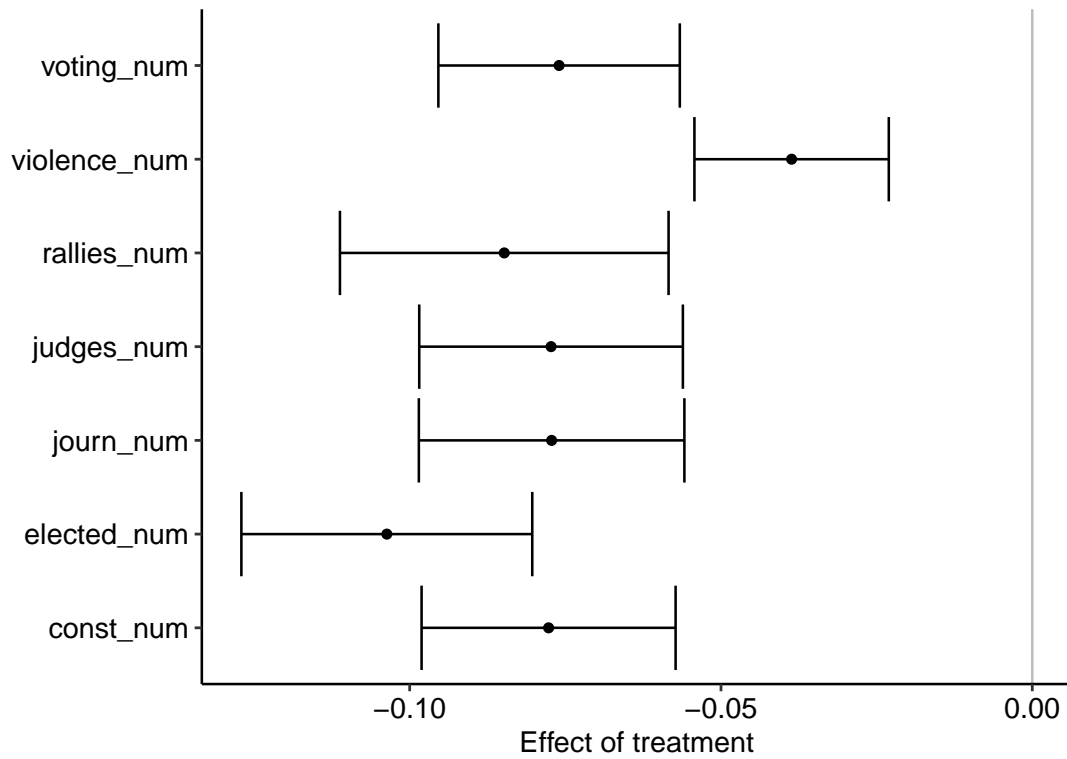


Figure S8: Treatment effect for each of the seven items used in the scale.