Proposal Summary:
Does In-Party Conformity Undermine Democratic Norms?
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What drives partisans’ willingness to undermine democracy? Recent research suggests that inaccurate and exaggerated meta-perceptions about opposing partisans’ willingness to subvert democratic norms significantly shape the individual’s own willingness to do so (Pasek et al. 2022; Braley et al. 2022; Lees and Cikara 2020; Moore-Berg et al. 2020). Partisans tend to overestimate the other side’s willingness to break democratic rules and norms, which in turn increases their own readiness to break such norms. Recent experimental work shows that correcting these inaccurate and exaggerated meta-perceptions improves the individual’s commitment to democratic rules and norms (e.g., Braley et al. 2022).

Despite the importance of citizens’ support for and commitment to democratic norms, we still know relatively little about the role of meta-perceptions in democratic backsliding. Existing work has focused on meta-perceptions about opposing partisans. In this project, however, our core theoretical argument is that partisans’ commitment to democratic norms is more sensitive to perceptions of in-group members than of out-group members. That is, we expect that perceptions of adherence to democratic norms by co-partisans are a stronger determinant of the individual’s own commitment to or subversion of these norms than perceptions of adherence by opposing partisans.

Understanding the impact of in-group meta-perceptions for citizens’ commitment to democracy is important for several reasons. First, recent work suggests that positive partisanship (in-party affinity) is more influential than negative partisanship (out-party animus/apathy) (Lee et al. 2022; Yu et al. 2023). Hence, there are reasons to expect that the individual’s perception of how other co-partisans think and feel about democracy may be a particularly important determinant of their own democratic values. Moreover, citizens are often exposed to information about their in-group, whether through news, online, or by socialization. Many recent polls, for example, have exposed Republican partisans to information about undemocratic sentiments held by a majority of their in-group members (e.g., Pew 2022). Does information about the share of Republicans accepting an election loss, for example, shape the individual Republican’s commitment to democratic norms? And is information about other Republicans more influential than information about Democratic partisans?

We propose to examine our argument in a survey experiment with 2,000 respondents set in the United States. The experiment assigns factual information from the Polarization Research Lab’s (2022) surveys about partisans’ willingness to break democratic norms. We then estimate the effects of correcting either in- or out-party perceptions on willingness to violate democratic norms (see proposed study design). Finally, we examine the expectation that this effect is particularly pronounced among individuals who express a higher desire for belonging to their in-party.

The proposed project makes important contributions to our understanding of the drivers of undemocratic sentiments among ordinary voters and partisans, adding to the growing literature on democratic backsliding more broadly. Specifically, we contribute by examining how in-group meta-perceptions may influence the individual’s commitment to the rules, principles, and norms of liberal democracy. Whereas previous work has examined the potentially detrimental effects of inaccurate perceptions about out-partisans, we highlight a novel explanation (meta-perceptions of co-partisans) and demonstrate the importance of conformity in shaping people’s commitment to democracy.
References


