Partisan Cues and Updating Support for Democratic Norm Violation

In a democratic system, citizens have the power to vote out politicians who do not comply with the principles of democracy. But the erosion of commitment to democratic norms jeopardizes the strength of democratic institutions and may lead to democratic backsliding (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019). Increasing affective polarization and democratic backsliding constitute two main parallel trends in American politics recently, which mobilized social scientists to investigate the potential relationships between these two. Does affective polarization undermine support for fundamental democratic principles? Recent studies demonstrate that high levels of affective polarization and democratic backsliding are positively correlated (Orhan 2022). Citizens who are very loyal to their political party tend to continue to support in-party candidates, even if those candidates do not adhere to fundamental democratic norms such as protecting civil rights, supporting fair elections or implementing checks and balances (Graham and Svolik 2020). However, the experimental studies that are testing whether affective polarization decreases public support for democratic norms show mixed results. Westwood et al. (2019) show that although higher affective polarization leads voters to support for exclusive corruption investigations against the out-party, it does not increase support for the use of tear gas on a group of protesters from the other side. Similarly, Broockman et al. (2022) argue that the implications of individual-level affective polarization remain only within interpersonal relationships and do not turn into a wide-scale behavioral change concerning the support for maintaining high democratic standards.

This study aims to investigate to what extent partisan cueing affects public support for democratic norm violations in selected policy areas in the United States. Prior studies suggest that rhetoric from political elites can undermine respect for critical democratic norms among their supporters (Gidengil et al. 2022; Clayton et al. 2020; Kingzette et al. 2021). However, two important aspects are neglected in the literature: (1) prior work has not tested the extent to which partisan cueing changes affectively polarized citizens’ support for democratic norms, and (2) it has not investigated whether citizens differentiate between sources of partisan cues (party elites versus ordinary partisans). In light of this scholarly gap, we first assume that supporters of both parties will follow their co-partisans and party elites in terms of democratic norm violation (H1a). When exposed to in-party statements supporting the violation of democratic norms in contested policy areas, they will follow the message and will update their stance towards the questions about supporting democratic norms more negatively. At the same time, we expect that, compared to moderate partisans, affectively polarized partisans will be more apt to increase their support of anti-democratic norms when the message comes from in-party members (H1b).

In the second set of hypotheses, we will trace the participants’ attitudinal change when exposed to out-party messages. To test whether participants will change their views in line with expectations from motivated reasoning (Lodge and Taber 2013; Taber and Lodge 2006) or parallel updating (Coppock 2023; Page and Shapiro 2010). Hypothesis 2 (H2) will test whether Democrats/Republicans will:
1. Update their opinions in a positive direction (Bayesian Updating) OR
2. Update their opinions in the opposite direction (Motivated Reasoning-Backlash Effect) OR
3. Do not update their opinions at all (Conditional Bayesian Updating)

Contrary to the first hypothesis, we expect that out-party messages will significantly motivate only affectively polarised partisans on both sides in the opposite direction. As the level of affective polarization increases, citizens’ response to compliance with democratic norms will increase as the democratic norm violation comes from the out-party. In a recent study, Kingzette et al. (2021) found that the party supporters’ willingness to support democratic norms depends on which party is in power. In other words, we argue that affective polarization will undermine the significance and value of upholding democratic norms by making party identity more important than protecting democratic standards. In a highly polarized political environment, we are expecting that voters "act as partisans first and democrats only second" (Graham and Svolik, 2020, p.392).
References


