

Research explores how biased perceptions may drive erosion of democratic values in US

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A new report published in the journal *Scientific Reports* sheds light on the current state of democracy in the United States.

The research by a University of Illinois Chicago social psychologist and colleagues shows that both Democrats and Republicans personally value core democratic principles, such as free and fair elections, but severely underestimate opposing party members' support for those same characteristics.

Results of this biased underestimation are related to the willingness of individuals, particularly Republicans, to subvert democratic principles themselves, according to the researchers.

Michael Pasek, UIC assistant professor of psychology and the paper's lead author, points out that for democratic norms to be strong, it's not enough that people themselves value democratic principles. They must also believe that others—and particularly opposing party members—similarly value democratic principles.

"To the degree that people come to believe that their opponents don't care about democracy, the prospect of political loss becomes untenable, and anti-democratic behaviors may come to be perceived as justified, even necessary," Pasek said. "We think that there may be a, perhaps preventable, downward spiral of democratic practice rooted in psychological biases."

In two surveys of nationally representative panels of Americans, the researchers asked Democrats and Republicans to rate the importance of basic democratic characteristics, like free and fair elections. Survey results show that both Democrats and Republicans highly value basic democratic principles, with average ratings for each group hovering around 90 on a scale from 0 (not at all important) to 100 (extremely important).

The researchers then asked members of each party to estimate how much the average member of their own party—and their opposing

party—would value the same characteristics. When asked to make these predictions, Democrats estimate that the average Democrat valued democratic characteristics 56% (in study 1) and 77% (in study 2) more than the average Republican. Similarly, Republicans estimate that the average Republican values democratic characteristics 82% (in study 1) and 88% (in study 2) more than the average Democrat.

Given the high levels of Democrats' and Republicans' actual support for democratic principles, the researchers posit that these wildly inaccurate misperceptions likely result from social psychological biases rooted in the fact that political partisanship is increasingly morphing into an "us" vs. "them" dynamic that has previously been shown to drive reciprocal dislike and dehumanization. The polarized media landscape and highly visible anti-democratic behavior by some partisan elites are also mentioned as likely key influencers in shaping citizens' [misperceptions](#).

While further research is needed on the effectiveness of informational interventions to correct inaccurate intergroup perceptions, the researchers note that maintaining democratic norms in the current political climate requires greater attention to hyper-partisan psychology.

"The maintenance of strong democratic norms ensures that parties have a fair chance to compete for power and that minority rights are protected," Pasek said. "As we continue to learn more about anti-democratic behavior by elected officials and approach a consequential midterm election where principles of democracy appear to be on the ballot, studies of this kind can help inform the public-at-large and hopefully ease democratic erosion in the United States."

More information: Michael H. Pasek et al, Misperceptions about out-partisans' democratic values may erode democracy, *Scientific Reports* (2022). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-022-19616-4](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-19616-4)

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