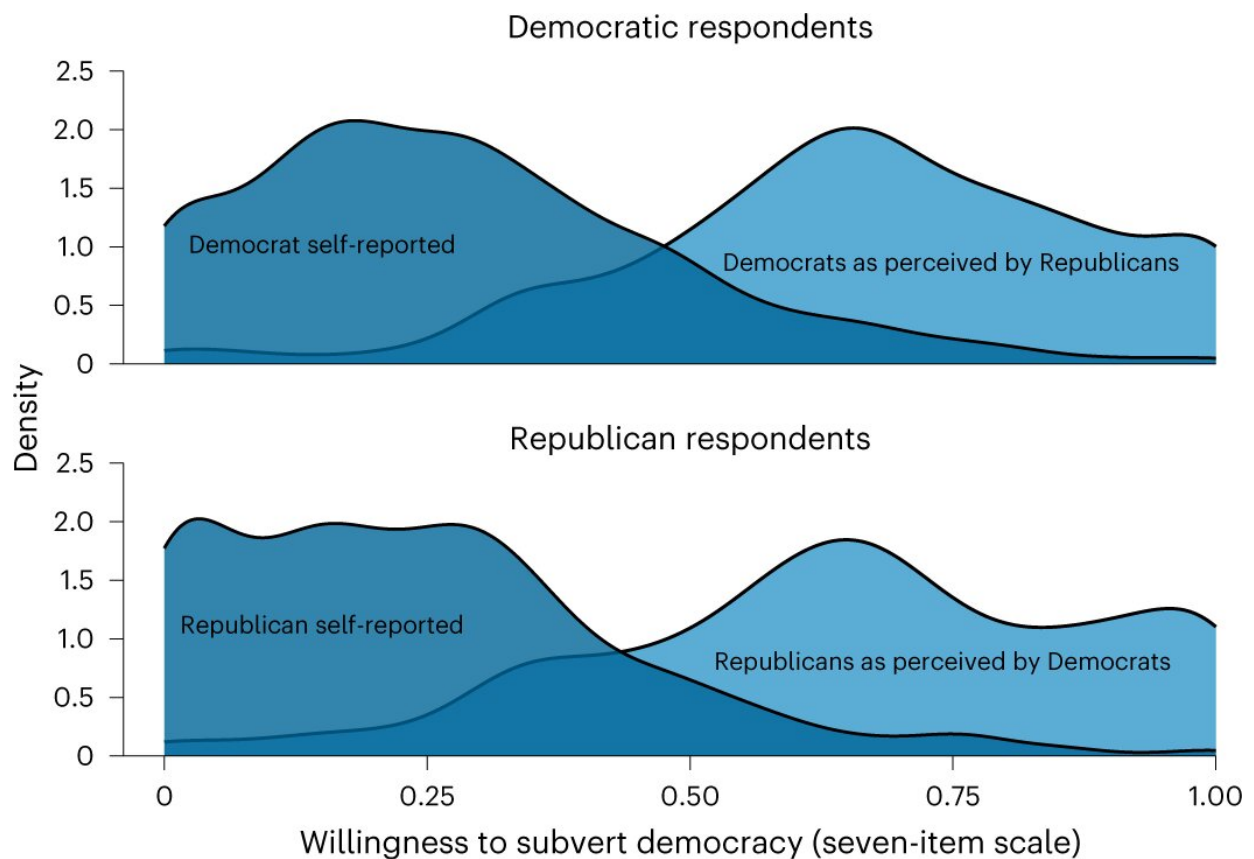


Study: False assumptions about election malfeasance could create a 'death spiral' for democracy

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Exaggerated misperceptions of opposing partisans' commitment to democracy (study 1). Credit: *Nature Human Behaviour* (2023). DOI: 10.1038/s41562-023-01594-w

In October 2020, two rival candidates for office in Utah made an unusual television ad together. Incumbent Republican Gov. Spencer Cox and his Democratic challenger, Chris Peterson, appeared in the same spot to note they were both "dedicated to the American values of liberty, democracy, and justice for all people," as Cox said, and that "our common values transcend our political differences," as Peterson put it.

Such reassurances are unusual, however, and can be overwhelmed by other messages. Indeed, a new study co-authored by an MIT scholar finds that U.S. citizens likely overestimate how much their [political opponents](#) seek to undermine [democracy](#)—a finding presenting both bad news and good news.

One ominous implication of the research is that by believing their political opponents wish to curtail democracy, some partisans will then justify the erosion of democratic norms by their own side.

"This can result in a death spiral for democracy," says Alex "Sandy" Pentland, an MIT professor and co-author of a new paper detailing the results, which are based on surveys and experiments involving thousands of Americans.

As the paper notes, false claims about the 2020 election by former president Donald Trump and others, as well as false news reports about purported election malfeasance, have made such beliefs common among Republicans; at the same time, Democratic Party leaders publicly emphasize that many Republican-backed measures imperil democracy.

Yet the more positive implication of the findings is that partisans on both sides largely avow that they support democracy, to a greater degree than their rivals think, and seem receptive to hearing that their political opponents do as well—perhaps through approaches like the joint Utah ad.

Pentland adds: "We find that making people aware of how much voters on each side support democracy has the effect of rather dramatically lowering the temperature on toxic polarization, and even changing which candidates people say they will vote for. Knowing that opposing groups also support democracy may be a core requirement for maintaining a strong democracy." For this reason, he notes, "There is also hope in these findings, and that is that by reducing fear between partisans, we can strengthen democratic institutions."

The paper, "Why voters who value democracy participate in democratic backsliding," appears in *Nature Human Behavior*. The authors are Alia Braley, a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of California at Berkeley; Gabriel Lenz, a professor of [political science](#) at UC Berkeley; Dhaval Adjodah '11, SM '13, Ph.D. '19, a fellow at the philanthropic research initiative Schmidt Futures and a former research scientist at MIT; Hossein Rahnama, an associate professor at Toronto Metropolitan University and a former visiting professor at the MIT Media Lab; and Pentland, professor of media arts and sciences and the Toshiba Professor at the Media Lab.

To conduct the study, the researchers conducted an [online survey](#) and then a pair of experiments, using the Lucid and Mechanical Turk platforms. The survey asked a representative sample of 1,973 U.S. citizens to estimate their political opponents' willingness to subvert democratic norms, and to state their own willingness to do so, when presented with seven types of nondemocratic actions, such as limiting polling stations, banning rallies, and more.

Overall, the results were similar between members of the two main U.S. parties; Democrats estimated that Republicans would be willing to subvert 5.0 democratic norms on average, while being willing to subvert 1.5 themselves; Republicans estimated Democrats would be willing to subvert 5.2 democratic norms on average, while being willing to subvert

1.2 themselves.

Individuals who estimated their opponents were relatively more ready to stop democratic practices were, themselves, more willing to abandon those norms. The scholars believe this tendency is exacerbated by the debunked claims of leaders like Trump.

In general, people "have overlooked the significance of would-be authoritarians' frequent claims that their opponents are breaking democratic rules," Lenz says, alluding to similar claims by leaders such as former president Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. He adds: "It causes their supporters, in this case Republicans, to tolerate the erosion of democratic norms by politicians like Trump. Instead of perceiving Trump as undermining democracy, they view him as leveling a playing field they believe has already been heavily tilted against them."

However, the research also shows that people are receptive to valid information showing that their opponents are intent on upholding democratic practices. In an experiment involving 2,545 U.S. citizens, the researchers queried respondents about their perceptions of norm-breaking, then divided them into treatment and control groups, and gave the first group feedback about how their perceptions aligned with the facts.

On a scale from 0 to 1, using the same seven cases from the initial survey, participants who had received fact-based feedback only rated their political opponents' willingness to subvert democratic norms at 0.40, whereas those given no factual feedback rated their opponents' intent to subvert democratic norms at 0.64. People in the treatment group were less willing to break democratic norms themselves, and, in hypothetical election scenarios, were less willing to vote for candidates who support the subversion of norms.

In still another online experiment, this time again involving 1,973 U.S. citizens, the researchers then changed the format of the previous experiment to reduce the chances that respondents could anticipate follow-up questions. The results were broadly similar, although, in an additional observation, the scholars found that both Republican and Democratic participants reporting higher levels of ethnic antagonism were more likely to support subverting democratic norms.

Overall, the results of the two follow-on experiments suggest that better information about political opponents helps raise confidence and trust levels; when Democrats see that many Republicans value democracy, and when Republicans see that many Democrats value democracy, there is at least an opening for people to avoid the downward spiral the U.S. may be facing.

"This work has important implications in a time when many people are looking for solutions to toxic polarization," Braley says. "People will become more willing to uphold democracy when they are less afraid of the other side."

She adds: "One possibility when facing a politician like Trump is to launch a counter-narrative aimed at Republicans, showing that Democrats actually will uphold democracy. According to our research, this should make Republicans more willing to hold their representatives accountable."

Exactly how to do that at a large scale is unclear. While the ad by the Utah candidates in 2020 was probably effective, it can be hard to reach large numbers of citizens. The researchers—like their colleagues elsewhere in the U.S.—say they will have to continue studying which approaches seem to help bolster bipartisan support for democracy.

"Our next step is to take these findings and test the best mechanisms for

reducing these mutual fears between partisans in real-world contexts," Braley says.

More information: Alia Braley et al, Why voters who value democracy participate in democratic backsliding, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-023-01594-w](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01594-w)

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