

# Political rhetoric changes views on democratic principles, study finds

October 25 2023, by Tracy DeStazio

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Most people will agree that over the past several years, American political leaders have been saying—and sharing on social media—unusual things that politicians would never have said a decade or

two ago. At times, their words can seem out of character for what a leader should typically say and can even appear antidemocratic in nature.

As our nation heads into the 2024 election year, what our leaders say will matter even more when it comes to fulfilling the ultimate democratic process of electing the next U.S. president.

These atypical comments or posts made by [political leaders](#) are technically referred to as "norm-violating rhetoric." Although previous research has deemed that such rhetoric does not undermine support for [democracy](#) as a system of government, a new study from the University of Notre Dame shows that some of that antidemocratic rhetoric reduces support for certain basic principles of American democracy.

The study, "Norm-violating rhetoric undermines support for participatory inclusiveness and political equality among Trump supporters," was recently [published](#) in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* by Matthew E.K. Hall, the David A. Potenziani Memorial College Professor of Constitutional Studies, professor of political science and director of Notre Dame's Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy, along with his co-author James N. Druckman of Northwestern University.

In this study, the two researchers shared 20 actual tweets posted on Twitter, now known as X, from former President Donald Trump with a representative sample of individuals. Half were Republicans who approved of Trump and half were Democrats who disapproved of him. Participants were randomly assigned to see either tweets with some norm-violating rhetoric or tweets with completely normal presidential language.

The team then measured each individual's responses to a set of questions about four core democratic principles: participatory inclusiveness

(everyone gets to participate in elections), contestation (free speech is protected), the rule of law (no one is above the law) and political equality (laws need to protect everyone the same whether they are of a majority or a minority group).

Hall added that while this particular study focused on Trump's actual tweets, it is not meant to be an attack on Trump or on Republicans, and he and his co-author plan on doing further research into different forms of troubling rhetoric from other Republicans as well as Democrats.

"It's not necessarily important who the individual is in particular, but it is important that they are a leader and what our leaders say truly does matter," Hall explained.

The researchers found that exposure to Trump's norm-violating tweets did not change how the individuals felt about democracy as a form of government, but it did reduce their support for two democratic principles in particular: participatory inclusiveness and political equality.

Hall explained that if someone who approved of Trump was shown a "placebo" [tweet](#), nothing changed. But if the Trump supporter was shown one of his more antidemocratic tweets, then he or she would indicate less support of those critical political values.

For example, Hall said, "When Trump's tweets talk about 'the most rigged election in our nation's history,' 'fraud that will occur' in the next election and 'fraudulent and missing ballots,' his supporters trust elections less, essentially losing faith in the process."

And, continued Hall, "When Trump's tweets refer to protesters as 'thugs' who engaged in 'looting, burning and crime' or to the media as 'the enemy of the people,' his supporters express less support for political equality."

"This shows us that Trump supporters are listening to Donald Trump," Hall explained. "And when he says these things, it shifts their opinions. So it is creating more polarization—not about ideology or issues, but about the principles of democracy itself. And if you have leaders who violate the norms of our democracy, it will lead to a public that is less respectful of our democracy."

For those who took the survey but were not supportive of Trump to begin with, Hall said there was no change in their overall attitudes toward democracy. However, Hall was surprised by the fact that when non-supporters of Trump read the tweets containing norm-violating rhetoric, they became more supportive of the rule of law.

"They actually become worried about executive power and how the elites are dominating our society," Hall said. "This means that Trump's opponents shifted to support other principles that they feel are threatened."

When asked what his research means for the upcoming election season, Hall predicted an amping up of the [rhetoric](#) in the days ahead—and what is important is whether the talk will reinforce or undermine support for our democracy.

"Rhetoric matters," Hall concluded. "And maybe what our leaders say doesn't matter today necessarily, but if they keep saying it over and over again, for years at a time, then big segments of our population will start changing the way they think about our democracy in the long term—eroding the basic fabric of support for our core democratic principles. That's how a democracy falls apart."

**More information:** Matthew E. K. Hall et al, Norm-violating rhetoric undermines support for participatory inclusiveness and political equality among Trump supporters, *Proceedings of the National Academy of*

*Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2311005120](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2311005120)

Provided by University of Notre Dame

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