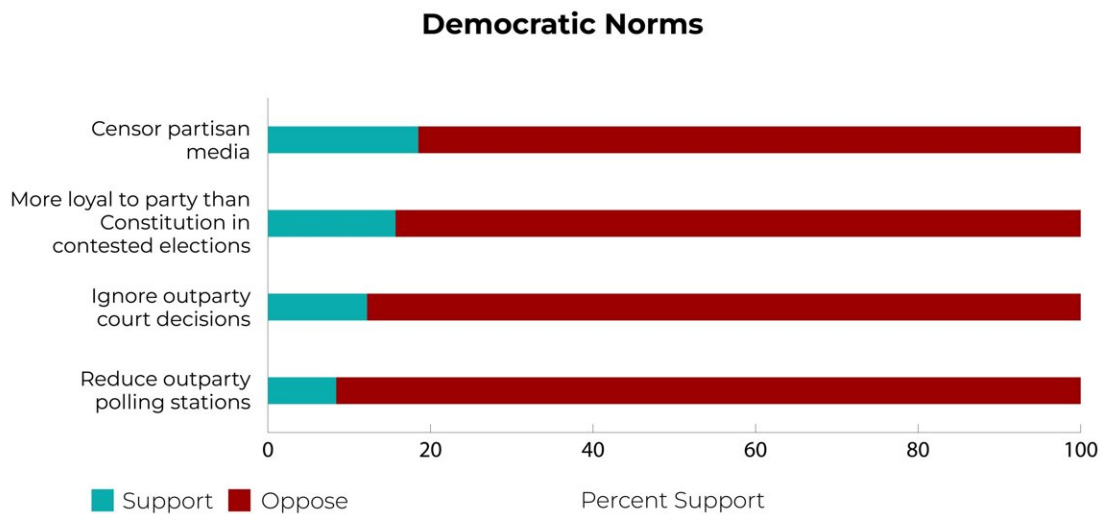


The majority of Americans do not support anti-democratic behavior, even when elected officials do: Study

March 18 2024



Americans have low levels of support for democratic norm violations. Credit: Derek E. Holliday, Shanto Iyengar, Yphtach Lelkes, and Sean J. Westwood

Recently, fundamental tenets of democracy have come under threat, from attempts to overturn the 2020 election to mass closures of polling places.

A new study from the Polarization Research Lab, a collaboration among researchers at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, Dartmouth College, and Stanford University, has found that despite this surge in anti-democratic behavior by U.S. politicians, the majority of Americans oppose anti-democratic attitudes and reject partisan violence. The paper, "Uncommon and Nonpartisan: Anti-Democratic Attitudes In The American Public," was published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*

From September 2022 to October 2023, a period which included the 2022 [midterm elections](#), the researchers surveyed more than 45,000 Democrats and Republicans on their attitudes toward five specific democratic norm violations:

- Reducing polling stations in areas where the other party is popular
- Being more loyal to party than election rules and the Constitution
- Censoring partisan media
- Believing that the president should circumvent Congress
- Believing that elected officials of one's own party should consider ignoring court decisions when the judges who issued these decisions were appointed by a president of the other party

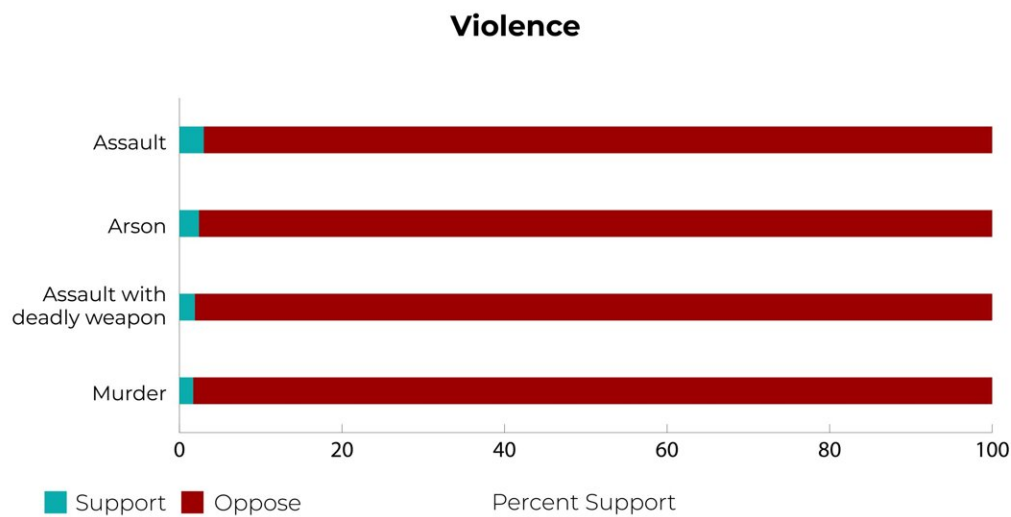
They also gauged these Americans' feelings about four acts of [political violence](#)—assault, arson, assault with a deadly weapon, and murder—as well as their perceptions about the other party.

Broad opposition to political violence

After a year of weekly polling, researchers found that supermajorities of Americans oppose violations of democratic norms and political violence of all kinds.

"Public opposition to anti-democratic actions and political violence was not only overwhelming, but also remarkably stable throughout the year," says paper co-author Yphtach Lelkes, Polarization Research Lab Co-Director and Associate Professor of Communication at the Annenberg School.

Of the five norm violations included in the surveys, 17.2% of Democrats and 21.6% of Republicans supported one norm violation. Only 6% of Democrats and 9% of Republicans supported two violations or more, suggesting that broad anti-democratic attitudes are very rare.



Americans have low levels of support for political violence. Credit: Derek E. Holliday, Shanto Iyengar, Yphtach Lelkes, and Sean J. Westwood

"Although any support for anti-democratic behavior is a cause for concern, the data show there is not a large anti-democratic constituency in America. Those who are the most likely to support anti-democratic actions are also less likely to be electorally important," says Lelkes.

Throughout the year, support for political violence within both parties was always below 4%.

The researchers also found that both Democrats and Republicans overestimate the opposing party's support for norm violations, in some cases by four to five times.

"Democracy is under threat in America, but these data show we are not on the brink of a citizen-supported push toward authoritarianism," says Sean J. Westwood, Polarization Research Lab Co-Director and Associate Professor of Government at Dartmouth College.

Elected officials and the public

Once [survey results](#) showed that the majority of Americans oppose anti-democratic actions and political violence, the researchers wondered whether the politicians who do endorse democratic norm violations and political violence—such as the denial of election results and the January 6 insurrection—might merely be reflecting the sentiments of their specific constituents.

To test this, they gathered data on the U.S. House Representatives who either voted to overturn the 2020 election results or publicly denied the legitimacy of the 2020 election results.

They then examined whether survey respondents represented by a Member of Congress who denies election results were more inclined to prioritize party loyalty over adherence to election rules and the

Constitution. However, they discovered that in these instances, there was no significant correlation between constituents' opinions and policymakers' actions.

"The real gap in support for democracy is not between Democratic and Republican voters, but between Republican voters and Republican representatives," says lead author Derek Holliday, Polarization Research Lab Postdoctoral Fellow at Stanford University.

"While it is encouraging to see Republican voters, like Democrats, broadly support democratic norms, it is alarming that election-denying Republicans continue to win elections despite their democratic backsliding behavior."

More information: Westwood, Sean J., Uncommon and nonpartisan: Antidemocratic attitudes in the American public, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2024). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2313013121](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2313013121). doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2313013121

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

Citation: The majority of Americans do not support anti-democratic behavior, even when elected officials do: Study (2024, March 18) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-03-majority-americans-anti-democratic-behavior.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.