

Who Will Defend Democracy? Evaluating Tradeoffs in Candidate Support Among Partisan Donors and Voters*

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Abstract

Scholars and pundits fear that the American public's commitment to democracy is declining and that citizens are willing to embrace candidates who would trample democratic principles. We examine whether violations of those principles generate resistance from both voters and top campaign donors and whether such resistance extends across partisan lines. In a conjoint survey experiment, we investigate how regular citizens and donor elites trade off partisanship, policy positions, and support for democratic values when choosing between hypothetical political candidates. Our findings indicate that both citizens and donors punish candidates who endorse violations of democratic principles irrespective of party. However, we find partisan polarization (especially among donors) in the effects of candidates supporting voter identification laws that threaten access to the franchise. These results suggest that the public and donors may sometimes be willing to forgive transgressions against democratic norms that align with their partisan and policy preferences.

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Introduction

In recent years, prominent studies have argued that public commitment to democratic values in the U.S. has declined (Foa and Mounk 2016; Wike and Fetterolf 2018). Though these findings are contested (e.g., Voeten 2016), Americans are becoming more partisan (e.g., Pew Research Center 2017) and more likely to have strong feelings of in-group loyalty and out-group rivalry (Mason 2018). In that context, voters' willingness to tolerate violations of democratic principles by co-partisans may also increase (Fishkin and Pozen 2018). In this way, increasing partisan antagonism could threaten the stability of the U.S. political system, which relies on consensual support of democratic norms (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

A new line of research seeks to evaluate this risk by examining how voters make trade-offs between partisanship, public policy, and democratic values (Svolik 2018). Most notably, Graham and Svolik (2019) find that partisan and policy considerations have much stronger effects on vote choice among hypothetical political candidates than “undemocratic” platforms related to electoral fairness or checks and balances. Other research considers the influence of elite preferences on policy outcomes via campaign donations (Gilens 2012; Bonica et al. 2013; Gilens and Page 2014). Notably, studies show that donors are more polarized and partisan than the general public (Barber 2016; Broockman and Malhotra 2018; Gooch and Huber 2018), but are also more educated than the general public. As a result, expectations about donors' commitment to democratic values are unclear, which has potentially troubling implications for U.S. democracy given the role that elites are thought to play in preserving democratic stability (Weingast 1997).

We merge these lines of research to contrast the democratic commitments of the American public and elite campaign donors. Using a conjoint survey experiment, we assess the effects of partisanship, policy stances, and positions related to democratic principles on the likelihood of choosing a hypothetical candidate. To understand whether voters will punish candidates who violate democratic principles, we estimate the effects of candidates broadly supporting or rejecting four salient democratic values: deference to court decisions, impartial investigations, legislative compromise, and equal access to the ballot. Our results indicate that partisanship exerts a powerful

influence on candidate choice, although the effect of candidate party is less for donors than for the general public. Policy positions exert a substantial influence on candidate choice too, particularly for GOP donors on tax policy. Most importantly, both citizens and donors on either side of the partisan divide punish candidates who violate democratic norms on judicial deference, impartial investigations, and compromise. However, we find substantial polarization by party on voter identification laws, a policy issue that threatens the democratic principle of equal access to the franchise. On this issue, donors are even more polarized than the public.

Research design

We designed and administered identical online conjoint experiments in March/April 2019 to a nationally representative sample of U.S. citizens provided by YouGov ($n = 954$) and a sample of individuals in the top 1% of donors by the total amount they donated to federal campaigns ($n = 570$).^{1, 2, 3} This design allows us to directly contrast the views of the public as a whole with those of the elite donors who are often presumed to be the most influential in national and party politics. In the surveys, respondents were presented with ten pairwise choices between hypothetical candidates.

The characteristics of the candidates were randomly generated from a series of alternatives. Specifically, each candidate was assigned a name from a list of 123 names designed to signal both gender (man or woman) and race/ethnicity (white, black, or Hispanic) (see Butler and Homola 2017).⁴ The candidate's partisanship could be Democrat or Republican. Each candidate held two policy positions, which reflect salient party differences over policy on racial discrimination and

¹The experiments received approval from the OMITTED FOR PEER REVIEW.

²More details on how we recruited this sample, as well as summary statistics and information on response rates, are included in the Online Appendix.

³In October 2018, we conducted an identical conjoint candidate choice experiment on a representative sample of the American public only. We preregistered hypotheses about trade-offs among partisanship, policy, and democratic values in this sample at EGAP (ID: OMITTED FOR PEER REVIEW). We did not preregister separate hypotheses for our March/April 2019 samples. Results for tests of our preregistered hypotheses are provided in the Online Appendix.

⁴Candidate gender was randomized with probability 0.5. Candidate race/ethnicity was randomized to be white, black, or Hispanic with probabilities 0.6, 0.2, and 0.2, respectively, to approximate race/ethnicity in the general population and among candidates for public office.

taxation. Finally, the candidate held positions related to four key democratic principles that were chosen based on findings from expert surveys and their relevance to contemporary debates and prior research (Carey et al. 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Svobik 2018): support for or opposition to judicial deference (an essential component of the rule of law), impartial investigations (a key check on abuses of power and impunity that was especially salient before the release of special counsel Robert Mueller’s report), compromise (an important governing value), and ballot access (a critical component of democratic equality, which we proxy using support for voter identification laws).⁵ In the conjoint tables, candidate names always appeared at the top followed by partisanship following the convention when information about candidates is provided to voters in standardized formats (e.g., on ballots and in voter guides). We randomized the order of other attributes besides name and party across participants, and did not implement any cross-attribute constraints.⁶

Based on respondents’ pairwise choices, we calculate the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) for each level on each attribute (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014), and display the results in coefficient plots that show the average effect of changing each candidate attribute on the probability of candidate choice relative to a baseline attribute level. Per Abramson, Koçak, and Magazinnik (N.d.), this estimand does not indicate which attribute a majority of participants prefer in a binary sense, but instead represents an average effect of an attribute (relative to some baseline) on the probability of candidate choice conditional on other randomized attributes. Our language accordingly reflects the nature of this estimand, which is more akin to average treatment effects in survey experiments than expressions of a population’s binary preference among attributes.⁷

⁵For examples of violations of these norms in contemporary American politics, see Mikellonis (2019), *New Voting Restrictions in America* (2019), Siegel and Wiersema (2017), and Barr (2010). As discussed above, the list of norms tested were chosen by the authors based on prior research and expert surveys and are not necessarily seen as norms by voters. We provide further discussion of the attributes’ connection to core democratic values in the Online Appendix. We acknowledge potential differences between these principles, which may explain the differing results we observe, and discuss these differences further in the conclusion below.

⁶The Online Appendix includes an illustrative example of a conjoint table used in our experiment and more details on the attributes included.

⁷One other point of clarification in interpreting AMCEs is necessary. Both Clayton, Ferwerda, and Horiuchi (2019) and Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley (2019) note that comparing AMCEs among different subgroups of respondents is sensitive to the baseline attribute level chosen for the analysis. Because our main attributes of interest are dichotomous, however, we can confidently compare AMCEs across various respondent subgroups without baseline attribute choices affecting our results. The race attribute, which has three levels, is an exception, but the AMCEs for race across all respondent subgroups are so small that there are no discernible effects regardless of which level is used as the baseline.

Results

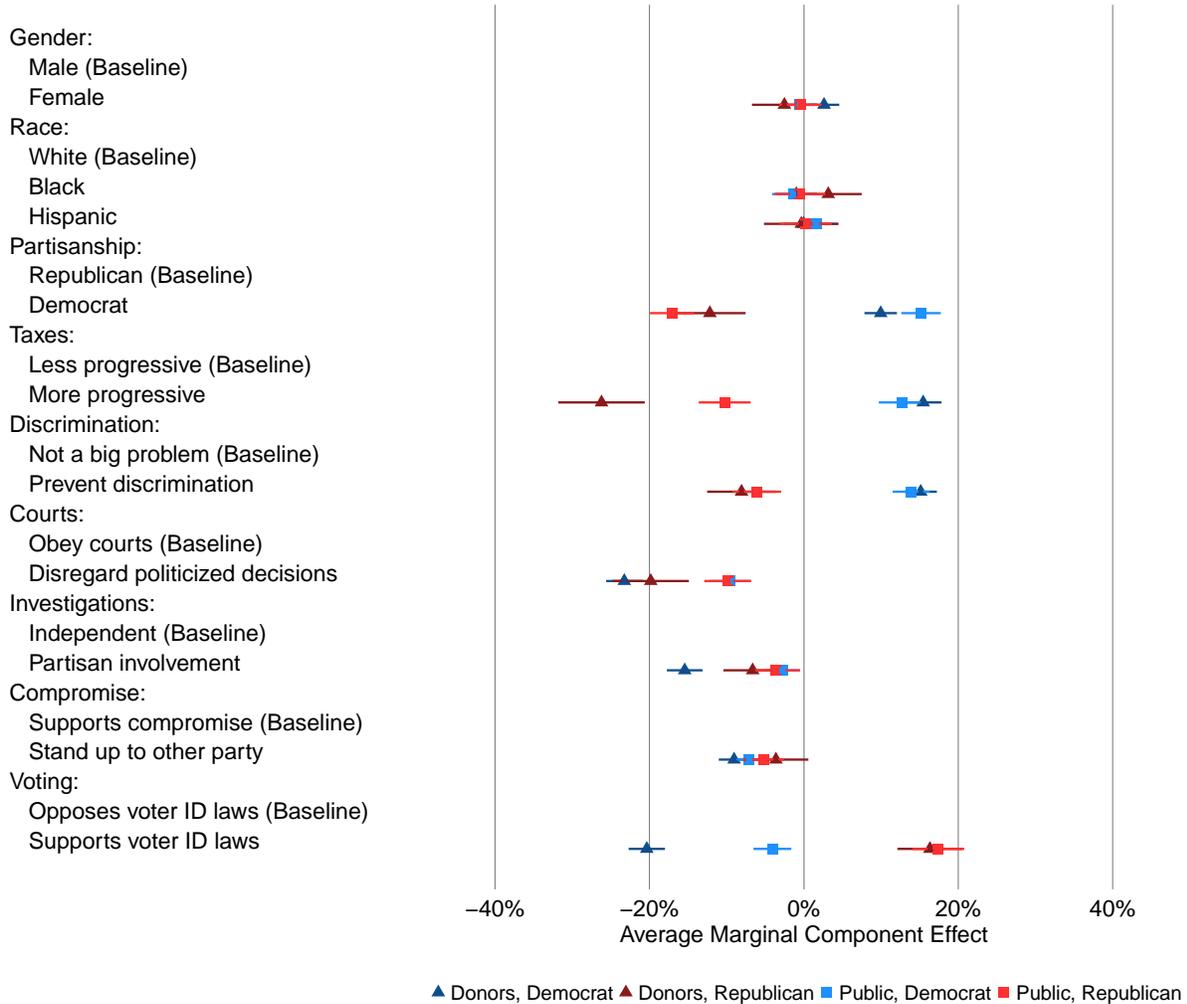
The results from our survey experiments are illustrated in Figure 1. We find no measurable effect of candidate race/ethnicity or gender on candidate choice behavior among either donors or the public. By contrast, the effects of candidate partisanship are substantial. Among Democrats, shifting a candidate's partisanship from Republican (the baseline) to Democrat increases the likelihood of selection by 10% points among donors (SE = 0.0107) and 15% points among the public (SE = 0.0130). Both estimates are statistically significant, as is the difference; the public leans on candidate partisanship more heavily than the donors. Across the aisle, the effect of candidate partisanship is similar among Republicans, although the difference in magnitude between the public and donors falls shy of statistical significance. Still, GOP donors and the public are 12% points (SE = 0.0236) and 17% points (SE = 0.0146), respectively, more likely to vote for a Republican relative to a Democrat.

The next two items test the effects of economic and social policy positions (taxes and racial discrimination) on candidate support. On taxes, moving from a less progressive to a more progressive stance increases Democrats' likelihood of supporting a candidate among both the public and donors (by 13% points and 15% points, respectively; SEs = 0.0153, 0.0121). For Republicans, more economically progressive candidates are 10% points (SE = 0.0171) less likely to be selected in the public sample and 26% points less likely to be selected (SE = 0.0285) by donors, the largest effect we observe. The effects of candidate social policy positions are similar between donors and the public. Moving from a more conservative to a more liberal stance on racial discrimination increases the probability of Democratic support by 14% points (SE = 0.0123) among the public and 15% points (SE = 0.0107) among donors, and decreases the probability of Republican support by 6% points (SE = 0.0161) among the public and 8% points (SE = 0.0228) among donors.⁸

We are most interested, however, in the effect of democratic norm violations on candidate support. Encouragingly, for judicial deference, impartial investigations, and willingness to compro-

⁸Although our experiments included fewer specific policy positions than Broockman and Malhotra (2018), the pattern we find matches theirs in that Republican donors are to the right of party identifiers and Democratic donors are to the left, particularly if we consider the voter ID finding described below to measure a policy preference.

Figure 1: Conjoint-elicited candidate preferences among partisan donors and voters



This figure shows the Average Marginal Component Effects of each attribute-level on the likelihood a candidate is selected, relative to a baseline level, among Democrats and Republicans in the donor and public samples. Colors indicate each respondent subsample. Standard errors are clustered by respondent.

mise, we do not observe partisan splits like those described above. Each partisan and constituency group is more supportive of candidates who uphold these democratic principles and penalizes those who betray them.

First, the effects of candidates pledging to “obey the courts even when they think that the decisions are wrong” rather than saying “elected officials should not be bound by court decisions they regard as politicized” are positive for all groups. The effects of judicial deference on candi-

date support are greater among donors (23% points for Democrats, SE = 0.0120; 20% points for Republicans, SE = 0.0252) than the public (10% points among both Democrats and Republicans; SEs = 0.0135 and 0.0155, respectively). On average, protecting investigations of politicians and their associates from partisan influence also has positive effects. Among Democratic donors, the probability of support for a candidate who “said elected officials should supervise law enforcement investigations of politicians and their associates” is 15% points (SE = 0.0118) lower than for one who maintained that such investigations “should be free of partisan influence.” The effects of support for neutrality are weaker, but run in the same direction, among Republican donors (7% points, SE = 0.0193), Democrats in the public (3% points, SE = 0.0113), and Republicans in the public (4% points, SE = 0.0160). Finally, candidates who advocate “standing up to the other party” are penalized relative to those who promise to “work for compromise across party lines.” The effects among Democrats (9% points for donors, SE = 0.0101; 7% points for public, SE = 0.0109) are slightly stronger than among Republicans (4% points for donors, SE = 0.0214; 5% points for public, SE = 0.0136), but we find no significant differences on compromise within either party.

In contrast, we find party polarization on ballot access, the most controversial attribute related to democratic principles and the only one that was directly linked to a policy proposal. The effects of candidates favoring “new legislation to require voters to show state-issued ID at the polls” on Republican public and donor support are substantial (17% and 16% points, SEs = 0.0171 and 0.0215, respectively). By contrast, the effects of voter ID support on candidate choice among Democrats are negative, although the magnitude is only comparable among donors (20% points compared to 4% points for the public; SEs = 0.0120 and 0.0125, respectively).

To illustrate these marginal effects, we calculated predicted support probabilities for co-partisan candidates who violate shared democratic norms among the public. Among Democrats (Republicans), a white, male, Democratic (Republican) candidate who holds traditionally liberal (conservative) positions on discrimination, taxes, and ballot access⁹ and who does not transgress demo-

⁹We hold positions on ballot access fixed in line with the stance favored by each party because access to the ballot is the one democratic principle on which we found partisan polarization. We estimate the magnitude of punishment effects for transgressions of principles on which we found pro-democracy consensus across party lines only.

cratic norms on judicial deference, impartial investigations, or compromise, has an 84.0% (84.6%) chance of being selected. If he transgresses one norm, that likelihood drops to 73.6–80.2% (74.9–80.4%) depending on the norm in question. If he transgresses two norms, the likelihood of selection drops to between 66.2–72.8% (69.7–75.2%). Finally, if he transgresses all three democratic norms, the likelihood drops to 62.5% (65.4%). The equivalent marginal effects for donors (shown in the Online Appendix) are even larger than among the public, with net decreases in the likelihood of selection of 30–45% points when moving from zero to three violations of democratic principles.

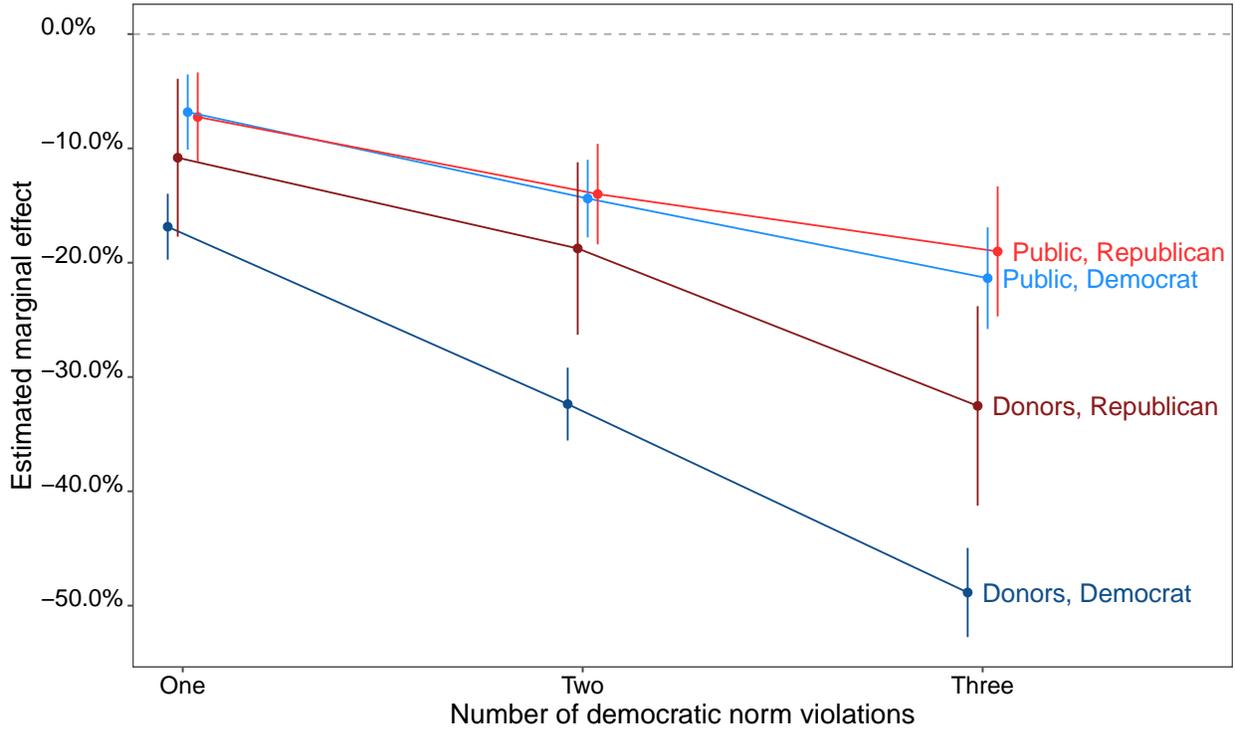
Our results also provide evidence that democratic norm violations do not have diminishing marginal effects. We ran a linear regression model with indicators for whether a candidate violated one, two, or three of the aforementioned democratic norms and then separately estimated the marginal effect of one, two, or three norm violations (versus zero) on the likelihood of selection among Democrats and Republicans in the public and donor samples. The results, which are shown in Figure 2, indicate that the marginal effects of democratic norm violations are approximately linear, meaning that the marginal punishment for an additional norm violation is roughly constant as transgressions accumulate. We also find that the negative effects of norm violations on the likelihood of candidate choice are similar for Republicans and Democrats in the general public, greater in magnitude among Republican donors, and larger still among Democratic donors.

Finally, we find no evidence of interactions between respondent and candidate partisanship for democratic values. Partisans are *not* more willing to forgive transgressions by co-partisan candidates in either sample compared to opposition candidates. This finding holds for the principles of judicial deference, independent investigations, democratic compromise, and ballot access via opposition to voter ID laws (see the Online Appendix for details).

Conclusion

Our results provide both encouraging and sobering signals about democratic priorities. First, we find common ground across parties with regard to democratic transgressions that would undermine

Figure 2: Norms violated and candidate choice among partisan donors and voters



This figure shows the estimated marginal effects of one, two, or three norm violations (versus zero) on the likelihood that a candidate is selected. Colors indicate each respondent subsample. Standard errors are clustered by respondent. The model includes covariates for age, gender, and education level.

institutions of accountability and foreclose compromise. The effects of promising to respect court decisions, supporting investigations into wrongdoing, and advocating for compromise rather than confrontation across party lines on candidate support are all positive. Moreover, the positive effects of pro-democracy positions are *greater* among donors than the public, contradicting fears that elite donor influence necessarily undermines democracy (e.g., Mayer 2017), and not conditional on candidate partisanship.

We urge caution, however, in interpreting these seemingly encouraging findings. The effects of supporting politically impartial investigations are positive on average among both Democrats and Republicans, but conceptions of impartiality may differ across parties. For instance, partisans diverged widely in their approval of Robert Mueller’s investigation prior to the release of his report (Mehta 2019). Indeed, previous research has found consensus between supporters and opponents

of President Trump that public officials should be punished for malfeasance, but those groups may have different officials or types of wrongdoing in mind (Carey et al. 2019). Other research also indicates that people are more willing to punish opposition partisans than co-partisans for democratic norm violations (Svolik 2018; Graham and Svolik 2019); the lack of differential sanctions we find may be an exception to the rule. Moreover, politicians' specific transgressions against democratic principles may be more narrowly tailored, and thus appear more justifiable, than the broad statements tested in our study.

We also find troubling levels of partisan polarization on the key democratic value of equal voting rights, reflecting a fundamental division over who should be included in, or excluded from, the political community. The effects of supporting voter ID laws on candidate support are positive for Republicans and negative for Democrats.¹⁰ We find even greater polarization on this issue among top donors, who are much more divided than their parties' rank and file.

How do we explain these divergent results? One possibility is that the pattern is an artifact of our experimental design. According to this view, we may observe polarization only on support for voter identification laws because it is the only attribute measuring a policy position rather than a broad statement of principle. Alternatively, however, the difference could be attributable to greater polarization among elites on voter fraud (e.g., Biggers and Hanmer 2017), which is the democratic principle we tested that has most direct implications for the parties at the ballot box. By contrast, the other democratic principles tested remain largely mainstream views that politicians on both sides endorse at least in principle (Zaller 1992). This latter interpretation is more worrisome because it suggests that each principle could become polarizing given sufficient partisan opposition or electoral incentives. Future research should seek to evaluate these competing interpretations and test how vulnerable currently uncontested democratic principles are to elite politicization.

Ultimately, our results suggest that Americans do share a consensus on democratic principles regarding accountability and compromise. However, the parties are deeply divided on the core

¹⁰Though scholarly debate continues over the effect of voter ID laws on turnout, convincing evidence exists that racial and ethnic minorities are more likely than whites to lack the documentation such laws require. Moreover, the problem such laws ostensibly address—election fraud by voter impersonation—is exceedingly rare. See the Online Appendix for a review of the relevant research.

democratic value of broad and equal access to the vote, especially among donors. This divide over access to the franchise highlights a fundamental vulnerability in America's democratic consensus.

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