Turning Out for Democratic Principles?

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Abstract

Can voter turnout serve as a democratic check? We break electoral punishment for violating democratic principles into three mechanisms: vote-switching, backlash (by those who vote because of the "D^-" candidate's violation of democratic principles), and disengagement (abstention among those who would otherwise have supported the "D^-" candidate). Using a formal model and three candidate choice experiments conducted in the United States, we find that each mechanism is concentrated in a different subset of the electorate: vote-switching among those who barely prefer the D^- candidate's policies, backlash among those who already didn't like the D^- candidate, and disengagement among those who would otherwise strongly support the D^- candidate. As polarization rises, disengagement becomes more important while backlash and vote-switching decline. Yet all three mechanisms are neutralized when voters do not perceive the D^- candidate as having violated democratic principles. These results offer important lessons for countering democratic erosion, particularly the value of encouraging abstention among a D^- candidate's core supporters. The importance of perceptions helps place our results in the context of recent elections: using ANES panel data, we find that 2020 Trump voters who rejected his claim that the election was stolen abstained and vote-switched at higher rates in 2024.

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> *[A] degree of apathy was found to have some compensating advantages in as much as it contributes to the stability and flexibility of a political system and provides for "reserves" of political resources which can be thrown into the battle in crisis situations.*
>
> — Hirschman (1970, 14)

In the twenty-first century, democracies that slide into autocracy tend to do so through consolidations of power by elected executives (Bermeo 2016). The gradual nature of this process often gives the voting public an opportunity to serve as a democratic check. While some voters may change their preferences in response to violations of democratic principles, others may respond through turnout shifts, entering or exiting the electorate in response. This mechanism may be particularly important in polarized societies like the United States, where hardened partisan loyalties have made vote-switching increasingly rare (Smidt 2017). Yet in research on the American electorate's ability to serve as a democratic check, turnout shifts have not been studied; most research instead focuses on attitudes (Braley et al. 2023; Broockman et al. 2023; Dias et al. 2024; Kingzette et al. 2021; Voelkel et al. 2022, 2024) or preferences for candidates who have violated democratic principles (Braley et al. 2023; Carey et al. 2020; Frederiksen 2024; Graham and Svolik 2020). This may in part reflect the limits of research design. Real elections are usually too spread out to attribute shifts to any one causal factor. Experiments are typically cross-sectional, preventing shifts in vote margin from being disaggregated into turnout and vote-switching.

We study the potential for turnout shifts to serve as a democratic check in the United States. Drawing on a formal framework and a novel experimental design, *paired candidate choice experiments*, we disaggregate electoral shifts into three theoretically relevant quantities: vote-switching, turnout shifts among supporters of the candidate who violates democratic principles (the D^- candidate), and turnout shifts among that candidate's opponent (the D^+ candidate). Turnout can serve as a democratic check in two ways. A "backlash" occurs when eligible voters who would otherwise stay home turn out to vote for the D^+ candidate. "Disengagement" occurs when voters who would otherwise vote for the D^+ candidate opt to stay home instead. In our first three experiments, we

estimate that turnout shifts contribute 30 to 40 percent of the electoral punishment for violations of democratic principles.

We next consider the relationship between turnout and polarization. Consistent with our model's predictions we find that backlash, disengagement, and vote-switching are concentrated within different segments of the electorate. As in previous research, vote-switching is most pronounced among those who weakly prefer the D^- candidate in terms of policy. Disengagement, in contrast, is most common among those with stronger preferences for the D^- candidate's policies. For these voters, switching sides is too big of an ask. However, the violation of democratic principles dampens their enthusiasm and leads them to stay home. Meanwhile, backlash is most common among those who weakly prefer the D^+ candidate in terms of policy. The violation of democratic principles gives these voters the additional motivation they need to turn out and vote. Because turnout effects are concentrated in different segments of the electorate, turnout becomes more important as polarization grows.

Our findings contribute to an emerging literature that considers the role of turnout decisions alongside vote choice in the study of the electorate's ability to serve as a democratic check (Svolik 2023). By enumerating the distinct mechanisms through which turnout shifts can affect election outcomes, we provide the first evidence that Americans' turnout intentions can change in a pro-democracy direction. Our findings also shed new light on how polarization shapes these dynamics. In low polarization settings, vote-switching emerges as the dominant mechanism, while the two turnout mechanisms each play a small role. As polarization increases, disengagement of the D^- candidate's supporters rises in importance while the other two mechanisms decline.

These findings have important implications for efforts to reverse the process of democratic erosion. Consistent with our finding that vote-switching is most common among those who only slightly prefer the D^- candidate on policy, existing research emphasizes the importance of persuading the more moderate segment of the D^- candidate's supporters (Lührmann et al. 2020; Lührmann 2021) to support pro-democracy candidates. And consistent with our finding that backlash is most

concentrated among those who are already inclined to oppose the D^- candidate but need an extra reason to vote, existing research emphasizes the importance of mobilizing pro-democracy citizens (Lührmann et al. 2020; Lührmann 2021). Yet our findings that disengagment is concentrated among the D^- candidate's core supporters, and that the importance of this mechanism increases in polarized environments, highlights the importance of attempting to persuade solid partisans that their side is eroding democracy. Even those who are not willing to switch sides can be convinced to abstain, contributing to a pro-democracy electoral shift.

Our findings also contribute a new perspective on the relationship between compulsory voting and democratic erosion. Existing research on this relationship examines how compulsory voting affects the electorate's preferences: Singh (2018, 2023) finds mixed evidence regarding compulsory voting's effect on satisfaction with democracy and Oprea et al. (2024) posit that by drawing in moderates and forcing extremists to pick a side, compulsory voting reduces politicians' incentives to polarize and thus limits the potential for backsliding. Our findings suggest that compulsory voting can also act as a switch that effectively "turns off" a mechanism through which aspiring autocrats can be electorally sanctioned—a mechanism that is all the more important when politics are polarized. In turn, aspiring autocrats in systems without compulsory voting may anticipate their actions' effects on turnout, making them less likely to take democracy-eroding actions. By allowing citizens to choose to stay home, voluntary voting creates the possibility of pro-democracy turnout surges ("backlash") and allows would-be supporters who disapprove of undemocratic actions to stay home ("disengagement").

Despite turnout's potential to act as a democratic check, citizens must perceive a candidate's action as undemocratic in order to respond to it. Although we think that all of the actions in our candidate choice experiments are unambiguously undemocratic, citizens vary in their understanding of democracy. Using a pre-treatment battery of questions that measures whether our respondents think that each action is consistent with democratic principles, we find that both turnout and vote-switching effects occur only among those who view an action as undemocratic. This suggests that

political contestation over the nature of an aspiring autocrat's attacks on democracy plays a critical role in how turnout and vote-switching play out. To the extent that citizens take a neutral posture toward democratic principles (Hall et al. 2026) or are convinced that democracy-eroding actions are in fact taken to save democracy (Graham and Yair 2024), one should not expect electoral punishment through either the turnout or vote-switching mechanism.

Methodologically, our approach makes three key contributions. First, we provide an approach to formally decomposing electoral shifts into the distinct contributions of turnout and vote choice. Our approach provides a new route to empirically resolving long-running public debates over the relative contributions of turnout and vote-switching to electoral shifts, which in our opinion have been hamstrung by a focus on cross-sectional numbers that cannot answer the question. Second, we show that this method of disaggregating election results can be fruitfully applied in the context of candidate choice experiments. By capturing shifts between different scenarios and accounting for choice instability over time, our unique within-subject design—paired candidate choices—opens new avenues for studying what affects turnout's role in electoral shifts.

Third, the combination of the within-subject design and detailed measures of policy preferences allows us to shed new light on the sources of instability in choice experiments. Whereas Clayton et al. (2025) interpret temporal instability in choice experiments as a source of randomness that should be corrected for, we show in three separate datasets that stability systematically varies a function of the strength of respondents' views toward the policy positions taken by the candidates. The difference between our approach to detecting heterogeneity and that taken by Clayton and colleagues is that our predictors are constructed to measure preferences over the candidates' specific attributes (their policy positions). Our view is that instability is a function of ambivalence and should be factored into treatment effect estimates.

In sum, we find that shifts in voter turnout can serve as a democratic check, and is a more important mechanism when polarization is greater. This highlights the potential importance of turnout shifts in polarized contexts like the United States. At the same time, the importance of

beliefs about whether a candidate's actions actually constitutes a violation of democratic principles suggests that to the extent citizens do not perceive a threat to democracy, these mechanisms will not operate. We return to this point in the concluding section.

1. Decomposing Turnout and Vote-Switching

In this section we define our key quanitites of interest: the causal effect of a violation of democratic principles on turnout and vote-switching. Consider an eligible voter (hereafter "citizen") who must choose an action in each election: to vote for Candidate 1, vote for Candidate 2, or Abstain. Let Candidate 1 be the candidate who may or may not violate democratic principles. In this state of the world, the citizen has the same choice of three actions. They may or may not pick the same action. This creates a 3×3 of nine possible combinations of actions: three possible actions in each of the two states of the world.

To define each candidate's vote margin in terms of the nine possible types, let $\pi_{Y(0),Y(1)}$ be the proportion of citizens who would take each possible combination of actions. The nine types are as follows:

Term	$Y(D^{-}_1 = 0)$ Action if candidate 1 complies	$Y(D^{-}_1 = 1)$ Action if candidate 1 violates
π_{11}	Vote for Candidate 1	Vote for Candidate 1
π_{22}	Vote for Candidate 2	Vote for Candidate 2
π_{AA}	Abstain	Abstain
π_{12}	Vote for Candidate 1	Vote for Candidate 2
π_{21}	Vote for Candidate 2	Vote for Candidate 1
π_{1A}	Vote for Candidate 1	Abstain
π_{2A}	Vote for Candidate 2	Abstain
π_{A1}	Abstain	Vote for Candidate 1
π_{A2}	Abstain	Vote for Candidate 2

Because we are interested in pro-democracy electoral shifts we will focus on the vote margin of Candidate 2, the more democratic candidate. Later this will make positive effects correspond

to pro-democracy electoral shifts. Candidate 2's vote margin is the number of votes they receive more or less than Candidate 1. If one divides by population size, the margin can be expressed as a percentage of all eligible voters using the π defined above. When Candidate 2 complies with democratic principles their vote margin $M_2(D_1^- = 0)$ is

$$M_2(D_1^- = 0) = \pi_{22} + \pi_{21} + \pi_{2A} - \big(\pi_{11} + \pi_{12} + \pi_{1A}\big)$$

and when Candidate 1 violates democratic principles, their vote margin $M_1(D_1^- = 1)$ is

$$M_2(D_1^- = 1) = \pi_{22} + \pi_{12} + \pi_{A2} - \big(\pi_{11} + \pi_{21} + \pi_{A1}\big).$$

The effect of the violation of democratic principles is the difference between these two quantities,

$$\begin{aligned} M_2(D_1^- = 1) - M_2(D_1^- = 0) &= \pi_{12} - \pi_{21} + \pi_{1A} - \pi_{A1} - \big(\pi_{21} - \pi_{12} + \pi_{2A} - \pi_{A2}\big) \\ &= 2(\underbrace{\pi_{12} - \pi_{21}}_{\text{Vote switching}}) + \underbrace{\pi_{1A} - \pi_{A1}}_{\text{D}^- \text{ turnout shift}} + \underbrace{\pi_{A2} - \pi_{2A}}_{\text{D}^+ \text{ turnout shift}}. \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

Note that the no-change terms (π_{11} and π_{22}) are omitted because they cancel out.

Equation (1) is written to highlight three distinct components of the change in vote margin due to a violation of democratic principles. The first pair of terms, *vote-switching*, is the proportion of citizens who switch from voting for candidate 1 to voting for candidate 2, minus the proportion who switch from voting 2 to voting 1. This is the net change in the pro-democracy direction among citizens who vote no matter what. Reflecting conventional wisdom, this term is multiplied by 2 because vote-switching has a larger effect on vote margin than abstaining.

The second pair of terms, the D^- *turnout shift*, is the proportion of voters who switch from candidate 1 to abstaining minus the proportion who switch from abstaining to candidate 1. This is the net decline in turnout among those who, when they vote, vote for the less-democratic can-

didate (Candidate 1). The D^- turnout shift is positive when Candidate 1's violation of democratic principles causes a net decline in turnout among their would-be supporters. This can be thought of as "disengagement" of D^- supporters.

The third pair of terms, the D^+ *turnout shift*, is the proportion who switch from abstaining to candidate 2 minus the proportion who switch from candidate 2 to abstaining. This is the net increase in turnout among those who, when they vote, vote for the more-democratic candidate (Candidate 2). The D^+ turnout shift is positive when Candidate 1's violation of democratic principles causes a net increase in turnout among their opponent's would-be supporters. This can be thought of as a "backlash" against the D^- candidate.

Note that all three terms depend on the joint distribution of voter actions in two counterfactual scenarios: one in which Candidate 1 violates democratic principles and one in which Candidate 1 complies. These quantities cannot be estimated in a standard cross-sectional experiment, in which one potential outcome per respondent is observed. Further below we explain how our design overcomes this challenge. Before that we introduce a model that generates predictions about how turnout and vote-switching covary with other factors.

2. A Model of Turnout, Vote Choice, and Polarization

In order to develop intuitions about how changes in both vote-choice and turnout serve as an electoral check on politicians who undermine democracy, we extend the classic, spatial model of two-candidate electoral competition in two directions. First, we conceive of candidates' compliance with democratic principles as a valence issue: while citizens may disagree over policies, they all prefer that candidates comply with key democratic principles. Second, in order to account for the variation in individual turnout decisions, we develop a simple model of expressive turnout: a citizen who turns out to vote for her preferred candidate obtains a psychic payoff, and this payoff is increasing in the difference that the voter sees between competing candidates.

Consider citizen i who is faced with a choice between two candidates, $j \in \{1, 2\}$. Each candidate i) proposes a policy x_{jk} on each of K issues, and ii) either complies ($D_j^- = 0$) or not ($D_j^- = 1$) with democratic principles. The citizen forms a preference over the two candidates and decides whether to turn out and vote for her preferred candidate.

Citizen i's payoff from candidate j is

$$u_{ij} = -\sum_{k=1}^{K} \alpha_k (x_{ik} - x_{jk})^2 - \delta D_j^- \,, \tag{2}$$

where x_{ik} denotes citizen i's ideal policy on issue k and the parameter $\alpha_k > 0$ represents the weight that citizens place on issue k. Meanwhile, the parameter δ captures the weight that citizens place on compliance with democratic principles; $\delta > 0$ implies that citizens value democracy and penalize candidates who violate democratic principles.

To examine how citizens resolve the tension between their concern over democratic principles and their policy interests, assume – without loss of generality – that candidate 2 complies with democratic principles ($D_2^- = 0$) while candidate 1's compliance varies ($D_1^- = \{0, 1\}$). Denote by $\Delta P(\mathbf{x}_i)$ the difference between candidate 1's and candidate 2's weighted (by the issue-specific weights α_k) squared policy distance from citizen i,

$$\Delta P(\mathbf{x}_i) = -\sum_{k=1}^{K} \alpha_k (x_{ik} - x_{1k})^2 - \left[-\sum_{k=1}^{K} \alpha_k (x_{ik} - x_{2k})^2 \right]. \tag{3}$$

We refer to $\Delta P(\mathbf{x}_i)$ as candidate 1's (relative) *policy proximity advantage* (over candidate 2). When $\Delta P(\mathbf{x}_i) = 0$, citizen i is indifferent between the two candidates based on their policy platforms. Meanwhile, a positive $\Delta P(\mathbf{x}_i)$ implies that candidate 1's policy platform is closer to i's ideal policies than candidate 2's policy platform; the opposite holds when $\Delta P(\mathbf{x}_i)$ is negative.

In turn, the difference in citizen i's payoff from candidate 1 versus candidate 2 is

$$\Delta u_i = \Delta P(\mathbf{x}_i) - \delta D_1^- \,, \tag{4}$$

and citizen i prefers candidate 1 to candidate 2 if $\Delta u_i \geq 0$.

In order to study how candidates' policy and democracy positions shape a citizen's decision to turn out to vote, we assume that a citizen who turns out to vote for her preferred candidate i) suffers a cost of turning out $c > 0$ and ii) obtains, in addition to the outcome-contingent payoff u_{ij} in (2), an expressive payoff that is increasing in the payoff difference between the two candidates, Δu_i. Specifically, a citizen who prefers candidate 1 to candidate 2 and turns out to vote for candidate 1 obtains the payoff

$$u_{ij} + \rho \Delta u_i - c \,, \tag{5}$$

where $\rho \geq 0$ parameterizes the intensity of the expressive component of the citizen's payoff from turning out to vote. By contrast, a citizen who abstains obtains only the outcome-contingent payoff u_{ij}. The payoffs of a citizen who prefers candidate 2 to candidate 1 are analogous.

In turn, how candidate 1's violation of democratic principles affects citizens' candidate preferences and turnout decisions depends on the interplay of two factors: i) how they resolve the tension between their policy priorities and democratic principles, and ii) how that resolution shapes their turnout decision. Specifically, when candidate 1 complies with democracy ($D_1^- = 0$),

$$\text{citizen } i \begin{cases} \text{turns out and votes for 2} & \text{if } \ \Delta P(\mathbf{x}_i) \leq -\frac{c}{\rho} \,; \\ \text{abstains} & \text{if } \ -\frac{c}{\rho} \leq \Delta P(\mathbf{x}_i) < \frac{c}{\rho} \,; \\ \text{turns out and votes for 1} & \text{if } \ \Delta P(\mathbf{x}_i) \geq \frac{c}{\rho} \ . \end{cases}$$

Candidate 1's violation of democratic principles ($D_1^- = 1$) shifts all of the above thresholds

to the right.[1] This implies that when $D_1^- = 1$,

$$\text{citizen } i \begin{cases} \text{turns out and votes for 2} & \text{if } \Delta P(\mathbf{x}_i) \leq \delta - \frac{c}{\rho}\,; \\ \text{abstains} & \text{if } \delta - \frac{c}{\rho} \leq \Delta P(\mathbf{x}_i) < \delta + \frac{c}{\rho}\,; \\ \text{turns out and votes for 1} & \text{if } \Delta P(\mathbf{x}_i) \geq \delta + \frac{c}{\rho}\ . \end{cases}$$

The intersections of the above partitions of candidate 1's policy proximity advantage $\Delta P(\mathbf{x}_i)$ under the two scenarios imply three distinct pro-democratic shifts in vote choice and turnout. We refer to these as *backlash*, *vote-switching*, and *disengagement*.

1. *Backlash:* These are voters with weak preference for either candidate who are, in turn, too indifferent at baseline to turn out to vote. Candidate 1's subversion of democracy mobilizes them to do so and vote for candidate 2.

2. *Vote-switching:* These voters are marginal supporters of candidate 1 who care enough for his platform to turn out at baseline. When commitment to democracy large enough, $\delta > \frac{2c}{\rho}$, these voters switch their allegiance to candidate 2 and turn out to vote for him when candidate 1 acts undemocratically.

3. *Disengagement:* These are moderate supporters of candidate 1 who turn out for him at baseline. Candidate 1's subversion of democracy at best *de*mobilizes them because of their (relatively) high levels of preference for him at baseline.

Below, we test these predictions about which types of voters are most likely engage in backlash, vote-switching, and disengagmeent.

[1] More precisely: as long as $\delta > 0$, which we will examine empirically.

3. Research Design

As we sought a research design to shed light on these dynamics, two constraints weighed on our minds. Except in unusual cases (Svolik 2023), too much changes between real elections to attribute shifts to any one causal factor. This pushed us to consider candidate choice experiments. But as discussed above, the typical experiment is cross-sectional, observing each respondent in one of multiple conditions and inferring average causal effects. In our case, the quantities of interest are defined by the joint distribution of what respondents do in two states of the world (e.g., Figure **??**). Existing designs cannot be used to estimate such quantities.

To work around these constraints, we developed a new approach that we call *paired candidate choice experiments*. In all of our studies, respondents complete pairs of candidate choice tasks spread across multiple waves of panel surveys. In "treatment" choice pairs, one candidate is randomly selected to violate a democratic principle in one of the two waves of the survey. Figure 1 displays a screen shot of one randomly generated choice pair. The only difference between the two choice scenarios is the presence or absence of one candidate's violation of democratic principles. In our analysis, we compare the treatment pairs to "control" pairs in which neither candidate violates democratic principles. We discuss the importance of the control pairs below in the "Threats to Inference" subsection.

The design asks respondents to make choices between randomly generated candidates for state legislature. The attributes and randomization scheme closely follow Graham and Svolik (2020). Each candidate was randomly assigned an age, gender, race or ethnicity, prior career, and experience level. In all choices, one candidate was a Democrat and one was a Republican. In addition, each candidate was assigned to take two policy positions in the same two policy areas as their opponent. The candidates' economic policies concerned either tax rates or state aid to school districts, while the social policies concerned either immigration or marijuana. Within each policy area, candidates were randomly assigned one of four possible positions. The policy areas and

Figure 1: Example of a paired candidate choice

(a) D^{-} candidate revealed

	Candidate 1	Candidate 2
Age	64 years old	61 years old
Gender	Male	Female
Race	Hispanic	White
Background	Legislative staffer for 33 years	Prosecutor for 35 years
Party	Democrat	Republican
Positions	Increase state aid to all local school districts.	Reduce state aid to all local school districts.
	Said the Democrat governor should ban far-right group rallies in the state capital.	Served on a subcommittee that reviews the structure of state legislative staff offices.
	Local police should turn over to federal authorities only illegal immigrants accused of violent crimes.	Local police should aggressively search for illegal immigrants and turn them over to federal authorities.

Which candidate do you prefer?

Candidate 1 | Candidate 2

Would you vote in this election?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Definitely not | Probably not | Probably yes | Definitely yes

The "next" button will appear after 20 seconds. →

(b) Both candidates neutral

	Candidate 1	Candidate 2
Age	64 years old	61 years old
Gender	Male	Female
Race	Hispanic	White
Background	Legislative staffer for 33 years	Prosecutor for 35 years
Party	Democrat	Republican
Positions	Increase state aid to all local school districts.	Reduce state aid to all local school districts.
	Submitted a proposal that would change the state's record-keeping laws and practices.	Served on a subcommittee that reviews the structure of state legislative staff offices.
	Local police should turn over to federal authorities only illegal immigrants accused of violent crimes.	Local police should aggressively search for illegal immigrants and turn them over to federal authorities.

Which candidate do you prefer?

Candidate 1 | Candidate 2

Would you vote in this election?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Definitely not | Probably not | Probably yes | Definitely yes

The "next" button will appear after 20 seconds. →

Note: Figure depicts an example of a "treatment" pair of candidate choices. One of each Panel (a) displays the version of the choice that reveals the D^{-} candidate. Panel (b) displays the version in which both candidates are presented as neutral. All other attributes were randomly generated at first, but were identical in both survey waves.

Table 1: Democratic principles and violations

		Study			
Principle	Violation	1	2	3	4
Civil liberties	Ban opposition protests	✓	✓	✓	
	Prosecute critical journalists who do not reveal their sources	✓			
Checks & balances	Ignore unfavorable court rulings	✓	✓	✓	
	Rule by executive order if opposition legislators don't cooperate	✓	✓	✓	
Electoral fairness	Close polling places in areas that support the opposition	✓	✓	✓	
	Draw unfair electoral districts ("gerrymandering")	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Refuse to concede an election loss		✓	✓	✓

positions were selected for their real-world relevance in state elections. For example, aid to local school districts is the largest component of most state government budgets, while local cooperation with federal immigration enforcement is the most discussed state-level immigration policy issue (often under the banner of "sanctuary cities"). The screen shots above (Figure 1) provide examples of all of these attributes. More details regarding the randomization scheme and policy positions appear in the Supplemental Material (section B).

Our interest is in the final candidate attribute, adherence to democratic principles. Again following Graham and Svolik (2020), we selected three core principles of the U.S. system of democracy: civil liberties, checks and balances, and electoral fairness. For each principle, we selected one to three realistic violations of the principle based on real actions or positions taken by politicians in the recent past. Table 1 lists the principles and violations. In one randomly selected survey wave, neither candidate violates democratic principles. Instead, both candidates take generic positions like participating in a committee to study the structure of legislative offices. In the other choice, the D^- candidate's principle-violating position was revealed, while the opposing candidate retained the same generic attribute. In Studies 1 and 3, the D^- candidate could be either a Democrat or a Republican; in Study 2, D^- candidates were always co-partisans.

The outcome measure consisted of two questions presented directly below the candidate choice. The first asked "[w]hich candidate do you prefer?" and the second, "[w]ould you vote in this election?" The candidate preference questions were forced-choice, as they would be on an election ballot, while the turnout questions were probabilistic, mirroring people's ability to accurately report uncertainty about whether they will vote in real elections (Figure 2). Screen shots of the outcome measures appear in Figure 1. Based on each respondent's responses to the two questions, we calculated the self-reported probability that they would take each of the nine possible combinations of actions. We use these nine variables to estimate treatment effects.

To test our model's predictions about the role of candidate polarization, we use our respondents' evaluations of the candidates' policies. Prior to the candidate choice tasks — and in Study 1, in an entirely separate wave of the survey — respondents rated each policy position that the candidates would eventually take on a 0 to 100 scale (Study 1) or a 0 to 10 scale (Studies 2 and 3) from "strongly oppose" to "strongly support." We average this measure for each candidate, calculate the difference between each pare of candidates, and rescale the result to range from -1 to 1. A policy difference of 1 means that the respondent strongly prefers the D^- candidate's policy proposals, while a -1 means that the respondent strongly prefers the D^+ candidate's proposals. Large differences between the candidates are analogous to highly polarized societies, wherein voters perceive large differences between candidates or parties. Small differences are more similar to less-polarized societies. Following Graham and Svolik (2020) we divide this measure into ten equally sized bins, allowing us to test the model's predictions without imposing any of the parametric assumptions involved in generating them.

3.1. Threats to Inference

Although we think our design is well-motivated given the challenges associated with studying causal effects on turnout shifts, we are mindful of two threats to inference. First, response instability. Even though the treatment choice pairs are identical in all but one way, respondents

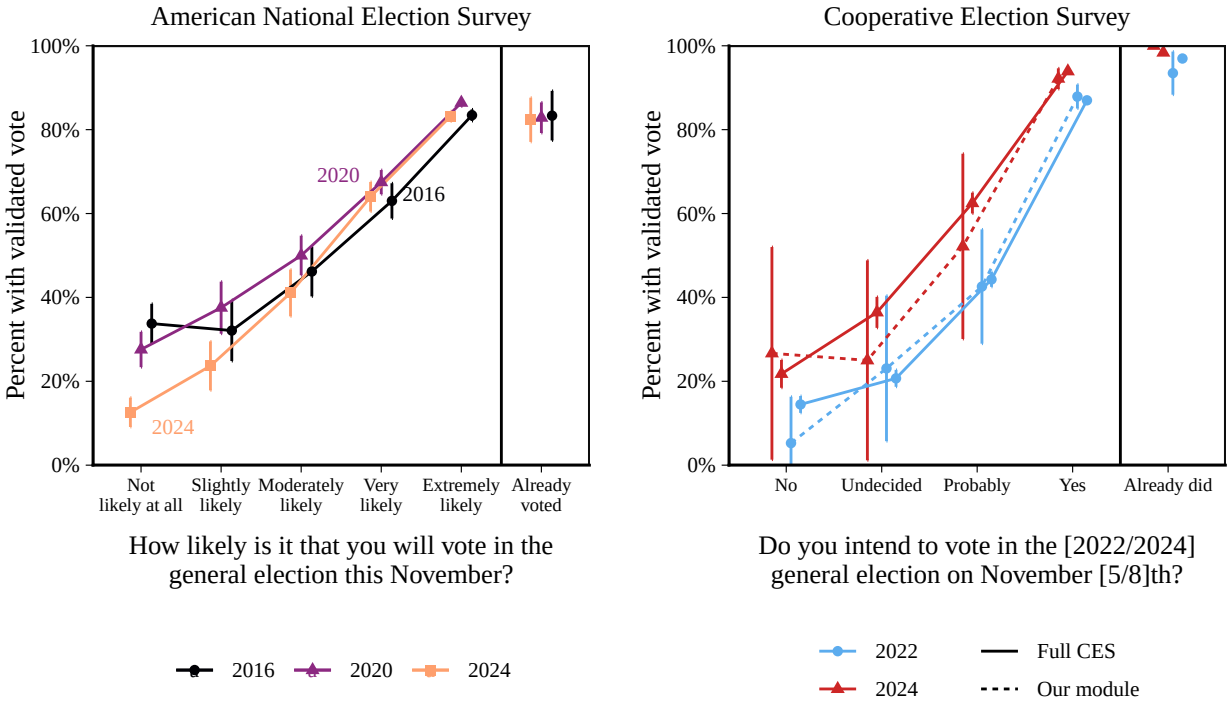
could still make different choices in the two survey waves for idiosyncratic reasons (Clayton et al. 2025).[2] To provide a baseline for other sources of instability, our design also includes "control" choice pairs that are completely identical in both waves of the survey. All of our treatment effect estimates below are the difference between the treatment pairs and the control pairs. This estimates the effect of D^- positions on the three mechanisms described above, holding all other factors constant.

A second vulnerability is our reliance on self-reported turnout. Whereas self-reported preferences are widely used in the study of electoral behavior, measures of turnout intentions may be greeted with particular skepticism. Though there is no way to validate a respondent's vote intentions in a hypothetical election, real elections provide an opportunity to examine the degree of correspondence between intentions and behavior. For five recent national election surveys that included validated voter turnout data — the 2016, 2020, and 2024 American National Election Surveys and the 2022 and 2024 Cooperative Election Survey — Figure 2 plots respondents' pre-election voting intentions (x-axis) against the probability that they actually cast a ballot (y-axis). In all three surveys, turnout intentions are well-calibrated with actual behavior: those who say they are not likely to vote rarely do, while turnout among those who express the most confidence that they will vote reaches 85 to 90 percent. This all the more impressive when one considers that imperfect matching with voter records is likely to attenuate the relationship. This provides some assurance that measures of turnout intention are meaningful.

Finally, we rely on a measure of policy difference to approximate how voter choices change under varying levels of polarization. To be a valid proxy, the measure must capture meaningful variation in our respondents' attachment to the candidates. To show this Figure 3 uses the control scenarios to test its relationship to three outcomes. Policy ratings strongly predict candidate preferences: candidates with the maximum disadvantage are only chosen about 10 percent of the time, while those with the maximum advantage are chosen 90 to 100 percent of the time (left panel).

[2] We do not undertake the suggested correction for instability because we think instability is a function of preference ambivalence (Figure 3, right panel).

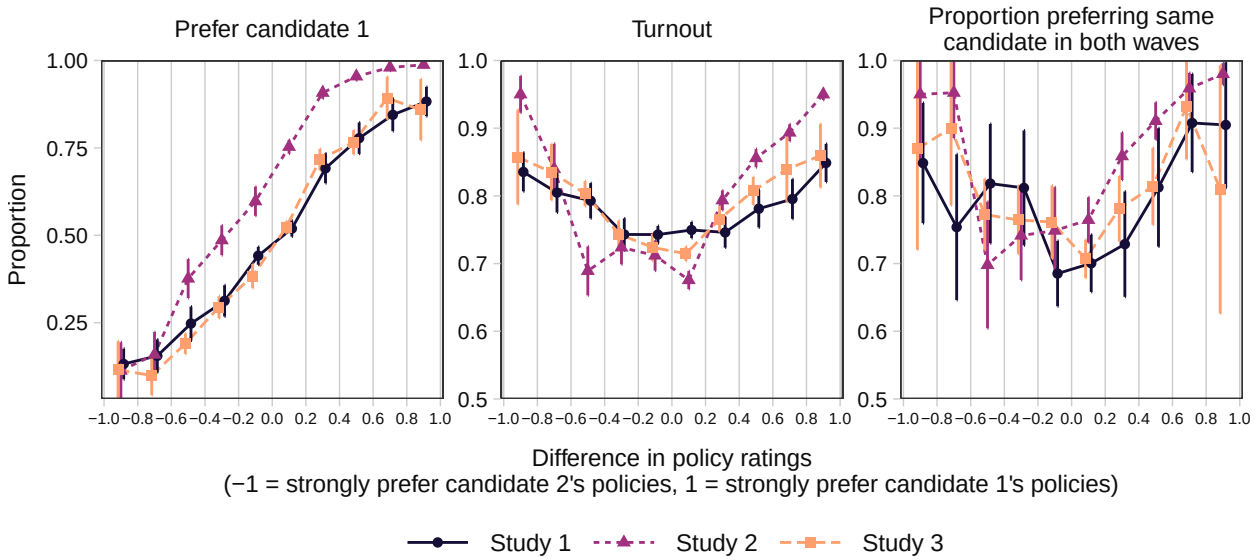
Figure 2: Turnout Intentions Predict Actual Turnout



Note: Figure depicts survey respondents' pre-election turnout intention (x-axis) against the probability that they were validated as having actually voted (y-axis). Left panel displays the 2016, 2020, and 2024 ANES (ANES 2017, 2021, 2025) with post-election weights. Right panel displays the 2022 and 2024 CES (Schaffner et al. 2023, 2025) with post-election weights. Red line and triangles represent our respondents from Studies 2 and 3. Dots are point estimates. Vertical bars are 95 percent confidence intervals. Confidence intervals that appear to be missing are smaller than the dots.

Policy differences spur turnout: in each study, turnout is 10 to 20 percentage points (pp) higher when differences between the candidates are large. And policy differences predict loyalty: the proportion choosing the same candidate in both waves is about 20 pp higher when policy differences are large. Each of these relationships is analogous to a stylized fact about polarization in the United States: it has produced a tighter relationship between partisanship and candidate preferences (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Stapleton and Langehennig 2024), higher turnout (Ahn and Mutz 2023; Wilford 2017), and greater partisan loyalty from election to election.

Figure 3: Policy Differences Predict Preferences, Turnout, and Loyalty



Note: Figure displays the relationship between candidate policy differences (x-axis) and the proportion of respondents who prefer candidate 1 when the democracy positions are hidden (left panel), the average self-reported probability of voting (middle panel), and the proportion of respondents choosing the same candidate in both waves when the candidate choices are identical (right panel).

3.2. Data and Estimation

We conducted three studies. Study 1 was fielded through Lucid Marketplace in Summer 2020. All pre-treatment measures for these studies were collected in an initial survey wave, followed by two additional survey waves containing the candidate choices. Studies 2 and 3 were fielded by YouGov in Fall 2022 and 2024 as part of the CES (Schaffner et al. 2023, 2025). All pre-treatment measures and the first round of candidate choices were completed in the pre-election wave, followed by the second round of identical or almost-identical choices in the second wave. Complete details appear in Appendix A.

In most of what follows, our unit of analysis is a pair of candidate choices. For each paired candidate choice, we use the joint distribution of turnout and vote choice (the four outcome variables pictured in Figure 1) to construct the probability that the respondent would take each possible combination of actions. We then use regression to estimate the treatment effect on these probabili-

Table 2: Effects on Turnout and Vote Margin

		Turnout			D+ candidate's vote margin		
Study	Treatment	D- hidden	D- revealed	Difference	D- hidden	D- revealed	Difference
Study 1	Treatment	0.763	0.760	-0.003	0.001	0.122	0.120
	Control	0.764	0.754	-0.010	-0.002	-0.012	-0.011
	Difference			0.007 (0.008)			0.131 (0.023)
Study 2	Treatment	0.793	0.724	-0.069	-0.527	-0.296	0.232
	Control	0.790	0.793	0.003	-0.533	-0.514	0.018
	Difference			-0.072 (0.008)			0.214 (0.019)
Study 3	Treatment	0.741	0.731	-0.010	0.012	0.283	0.271
	Control	0.761	0.731	-0.031	0.029	0.027	-0.002
	Difference			0.021 (0.009)			0.273 (0.022)

ties. Because each respondent completed more than one pair of choices, we cluster standard errors at the respondent level.

4. Turnout as a Democratic Check

We begin by separately examining the treatment effects on turnout and the D^+ candidate's vote margin (Table 2). In all three studies we see a large electoral shift in response to the D^- candidate's violation of democratic principles: by 13 percentage points (pp) in Study 1, 21 pp in Study 2, and 27 pp in Study 3. By comparison, the turnout shifts are smaller. In Studies 1 and 3, turnout only changes by 1 or 2 pp while in Study 2, turnout declines by 7 pp. However, as illustrated above (Figure **??**), small aggregate turnout declines could represent offsetting shifts among supporters of the D^+ and D^- candidates. Turnout's contribution to electoral shifts is not readily apparent from the standard topline results.

Next we split our respondents' choices into vote-switching and turnout effects (Table 3). In all three studies we observe offsetting turnout effects. Violations of democratic principles made those who would have voted D^- more likely to switch to abstaining (third row of each subtable), those who would have voted D^+ less likely to switch to abstain (sixth row). Meanwhile, among

those who would have abstained, violations cause an increase in the proportion who instead vote D^+ (eighth row) and a decrease in the proportion who instead vote D^-. In Study 1, even the miniscule seeming 0.7 pp decline in turnout (Table 2) consists of four separate effects: an 0.6 pp increase in switches from voting D^- to abstaining (Table 3, third row), a 1.2 pp decrease in switches from voting D^+ to abstaining (sixth row), a 1.6 pp increase in switches from abstaining to voting D^+, and a 1.5 pp decrease in switches from abstaining to D^-. Each individual shift is as large or larger than the aggregate turnout effect, opening the door for turnout to matter a lot more than is evident in the toplines.

To aggregate the relative contributions of turnout and vote-switching, we aggregate the nine possible combinations of actions displayed in Table 3 into three mechanisms: vote-switching, turnout shifts among those who support the D^- candidate when they vote (the "D^- turnout shift" or "turnout among D^- supporters"), and turnout shifts by those who support the D^+ candidate when they vote (the "D^+ turnout shift" or "turnout among D^+ supporters"). Figure 4 illustrates this aggregation for all three studies. The left panels display the treatment effect on each combination of actions, which match the estimates in the "effect" column of Table 3. The right panels display the net effects on vote-switching and turnout.

In all three studies, violations of democratic principles cause a negative turnout shift among D^- supporters. In Study 1, the net D^- turnout shift was -2.1 pp, reflecting the 1.5 pp decrease in the proportion of abstainers who switch to voting D^- and the 0.6 pp increase in the proportion of D^- voters who switch to abstaining. In Study 2, the shift was 7.4 pp and in Study 3, 3.1 pp. We refer to this pattern a disengagement effect: the D^- position causes would-be supporters to intend to stay home. In principle, the opposite could occur. We would refer to a positive effect on D^- turnout as an activation effect.

In two of the three studies, violations of democratic principles cause a positive turnout shift among D^+ supporters. In Study 1, turnout among D^+ supporters increases by 2.8 pp; in Study 3, by 5.2 pp. We refer to this as a backlash effect: the D^- candidate's violation of democratic principles

Table 3: Effect of D^- Position on Joint Distribution of Outcomes

(a) Study 1

		Treatment				
Choice 1	Choice 2	D- hidden	D- revealed	Effect	SE	p
Vote D-	Stick with D-	0.242	0.202	-0.039	0.010	0.000
	Switch to D+	0.069	0.101	0.031	0.007	0.000
	Abstain	0.072	0.078	0.006	0.004	0.139
Vote D+	Stick with D+	0.233	0.255	0.022	0.011	0.035
	Switch to D-	0.071	0.062	-0.010	0.006	0.117
	Abstain	0.077	0.065	-0.012	0.004	0.003
Abstain	Still abstain	0.097	0.097	0.000	0.003	0.921
	Vote for D+	0.069	0.085	0.016	0.004	0.000
	Vote for D-	0.070	0.055	-0.015	0.004	0.000

(b) Study 2

		Treatment				
Choice 1	Choice 2	D- hidden	D- revealed	Effect	SE	p
Vote D-	Stick with D-	0.537	0.417	-0.120	0.008	0.000
	Switch to D+	0.037	0.099	0.062	0.006	0.000
	Abstain	0.088	0.144	0.056	0.005	0.000
Vote D+	Stick with D+	0.069	0.076	0.007	0.002	0.004
	Switch to D-	0.032	0.025	-0.007	0.003	0.047
	Abstain	0.028	0.032	0.004	0.002	0.061
Abstain	Still abstain	0.091	0.099	0.009	0.002	0.000
	Vote for D+	0.034	0.040	0.006	0.002	0.024
	Vote for D-	0.085	0.068	-0.017	0.003	0.000

(c) Study 3

		Treatment				
Choice 1	Choice 2	D- hidden	D- revealed	Effect	SE	p
Vote D-	Stick with D-	0.224	0.144	-0.080	0.010	0.000
	Switch to D+	0.066	0.134	0.068	0.007	0.000
	Abstain	0.076	0.087	0.011	0.004	0.013
Vote D+	Stick with D+	0.249	0.271	0.022	0.011	0.037
	Switch to D-	0.062	0.035	-0.027	0.005	0.000
	Abstain	0.084	0.071	-0.013	0.004	0.002
Abstain	Still abstain	0.109	0.111	0.002	0.003	0.489
	Vote for D+	0.064	0.103	0.038	0.004	0.000
	Vote for D-	0.065	0.045	-0.020	0.004	0.000

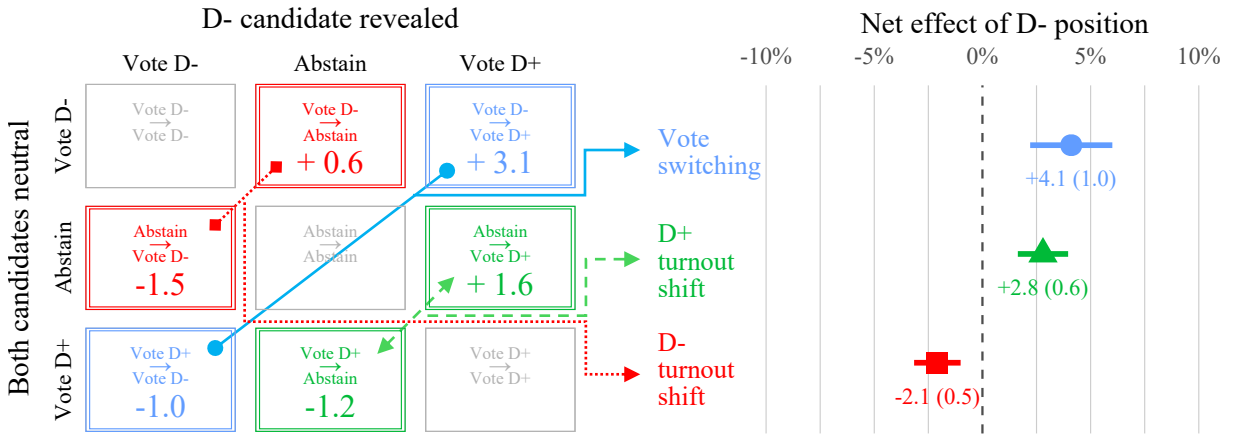
triggers an increase in turnout among voters inclined to support their opponent. In principle, the opposite could also occur. We would refer to a negative effect on the D^+ turnout as an acquiescence effect.

On net, these oppositely signed turnout shifts had a substantial effect on election results. Yet since vote-switching is more impactful than abstaining, the relative size of the turnout and vote-switching effects do not capture their relative imporatnce. To quantify the relative contributions of turnout and vote-switching to the electoral shift, we apply the decomposition formula introduced above to examine how each mechanism (Figure 4) contributes to the overall shift in the D^+ candidate's vote margin (Table 2). In Study 1, vote-switching contributes an 8.2 pp shift (2×4.1) while turnout contributes a 4.9 pp shift ($2.8 - 2.1$). This means that turnout was responsible for nearly 40 percent of the electoral shift (4.9 / (4.9+8.2)). In Study 2, vote-switching contributes a 13.8 pp shift (2×6.9) while turnout contributes 7.6 pp ($0.2 - 7.4$), which is about 35 percent of the total (7.6 / (7.6+13.8)). In Study 3, vote-switching contributes a 19.0 pp shift (2×9.5) while turnout contributes 8.3 pp ($5.2 - 3.1$), which is about 30 percent of the total (8.3 / (8.3+19.0)).

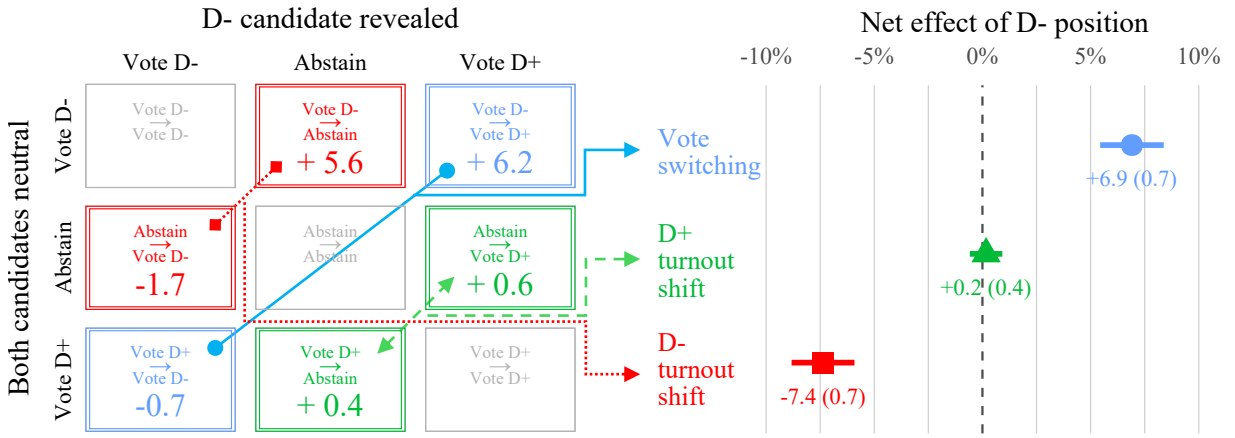
In sum, turnout makes a substantial contribution to electoral punishment for violations of democratic principles. Even when the aggregate change in turnout was small, turnout declines among D^- supporters and increases among D^+ supporters can have opposite effects on vote margin, resulting in a larger turnout contribution than meets the eye.

Figure 4: Aggregating the Effect of D$^-$ Positions into Three Mechanisms

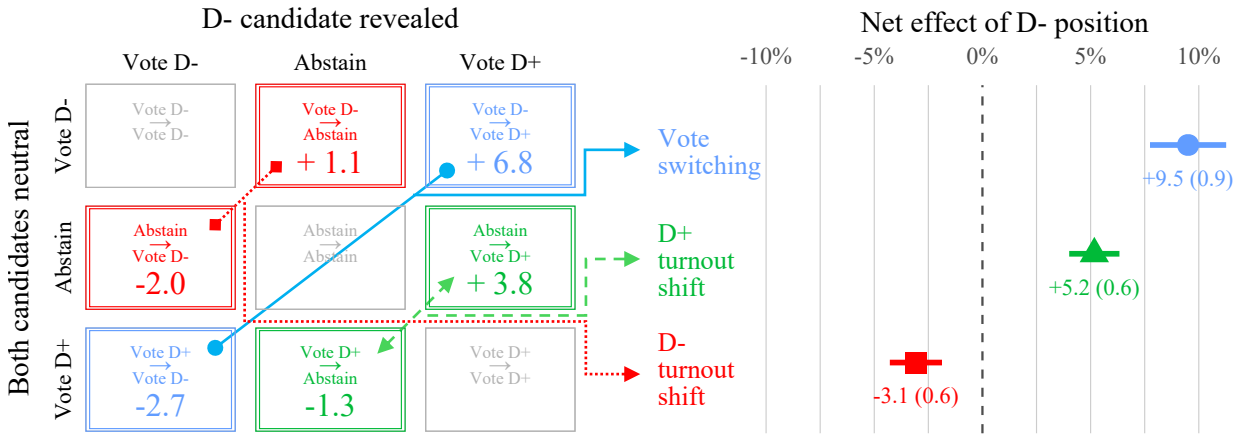
(a) Study 1



(b) Study 2



(c) Study 3



Note: Left panels depict the effect of D$^-$ positions on the joint distribution of turnout and vote choice in paired candidate choice experiments. Right panels aggregate these into three quantities: net vote-switching in favor of the D+ candidate, the net turnout shift among D+ supporters, and the net turnout shift among D$^-$ supporters. Standard errors in parentheses. Horizontal bars are 95 percent confidence intervals.

5. The Role of Candidate Polarization

Next we turn to our model's predictions about the relationship between polarization and electoral punishment. We focus on the following predictions:

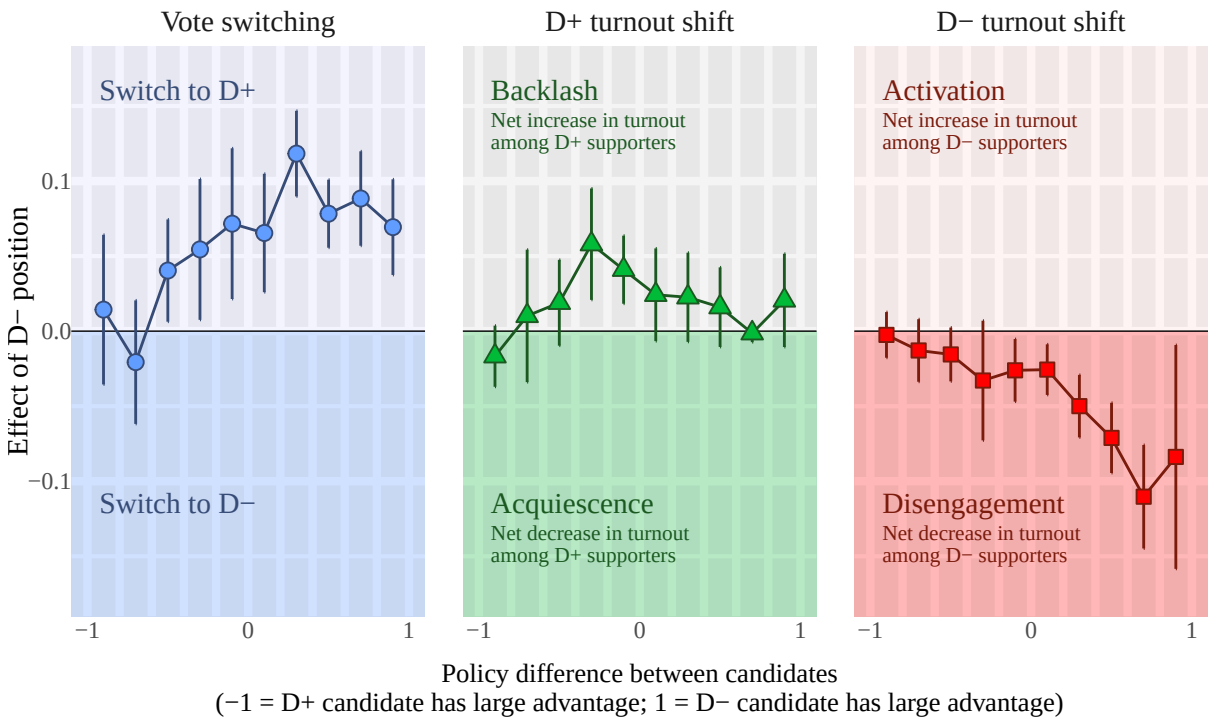
1. Vote-switching is most common among voters who weakly prefer the D^- candidate on policy.
2. Backlash is most common among voters who weakly prefer the D^+ candidate on policy.
3. Disengagement is most common among voters who strongly prefer the D^- candidate on policy.
4. Electoral punishment for violating of democratic principles declines as polarization rises.
5. Turnout's share of electoral punishment rises as polarization rises.

We summarize our results across the three studies using random effects meta-analysis. We use the `meta` package in R (Schwarzer et al. 2015). In the supplementary material, Table A1 contains study-by-study results.

The first three predictions describe how the three mechanisms vary according to the policy difference between the candidates. Figure 5 displays the meta-analytic estimates for these predictions. Consistent with prediction #1, the left panel shows that vote-switching is most common among voters who weakly prefer the D^- candidate on polices (around 0.2 to 0.4 on the measure of policy difference). Relative to voters who like the D^- candidate's policies less, these voters are more likely to prefer the D^- candidate at baseline, creating a larger group of potential defectors. Yet relative to voters who like the D^- candidate's policies more, these voters have to give up less in terms of policy to switch sides. This is similar to results from earlier research (Graham and Svolik 2020).

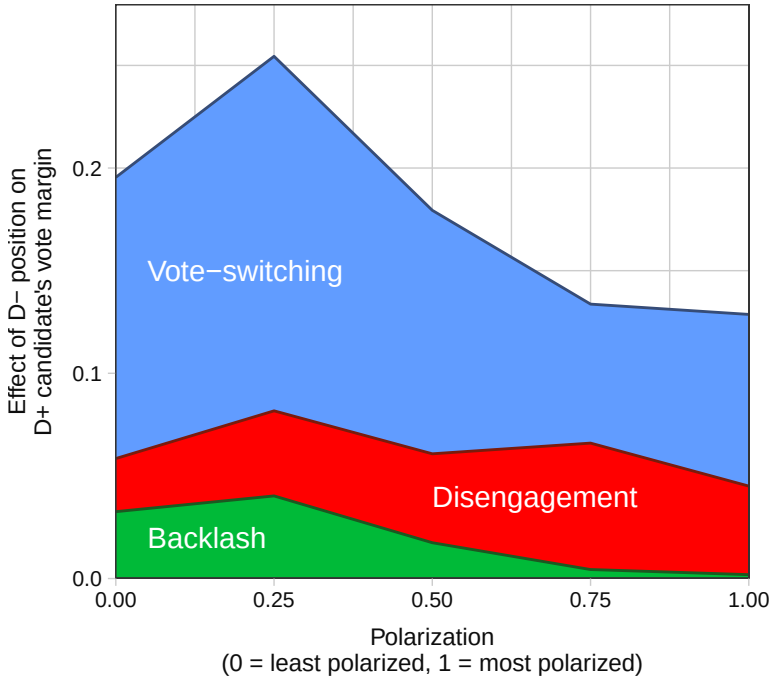
The turnout mechanisms also support the model's predictions (#2 and #3). Backlash is concentrated among voters who slightly prefer the D^+ candidate on policy (about -0.4 to -0.2 on the measure of policy difference). These voters aren't excited enough about the D^+ candidate enough to vote at baseline. Learning about the D^- candidate's violation of democratic principles gives

Figure 5: Effects by policy differences between candidates



Note: Figure depicts conditional effects by policy and partisan differences between the candidates, as measured by respondents' pre-treatment preferences over the candidates' eventual attributes. The y-axis displays the estimated effect of a D^- position on vote-switching (left panel), D^+ turnout shifts (middle panel), and D^- turnout shifts (right panel). The x-axis displays the D^- candidate's dis/advantage in terms of policy. Estimates were aggregated across studies using random effects meta-analysis. Appendix Table A1 contains the study-by-study estimates.

Figure 6: Punishment and Contribution of Turnout by Level of Polarization



them the extra motivation they need to turn out and cast a vote for the candidate they were inclined to prefer anyway. Disengagement is concentrated among respondents who solidly prefer the D^- candidate's policies (about 0.6 to 0.8). For these voters, the violation of democratic principles dampens their enthusiasm for the D^- candidate, but switching sides is a bridge too far.

The last two predictions concern how electoral punishment and turnout's contribution to it vary according to the degree of polarization. To measure polarization we take the absolute value of the candidate policy difference measure used above. Low values indicate small differences between candidates, similar to a society that is not very polarized. Higher values indicate greater differences between candidates. Using this measure, we apply the decomposition formula to the mechanism-by-mechanism estimates displayed above. Figure 6 displays the results.

We find clear support for the prediction that electoral punishment declines as polarization increases. At the two lowest levels of polarization the vote margin shift is 20 and 25 pp, while at the two highest levels it declines to about 13 pp. We also find evidence that turnout's contribution to the electoral punishment increases with polarization. At the two lowest levels of polarization

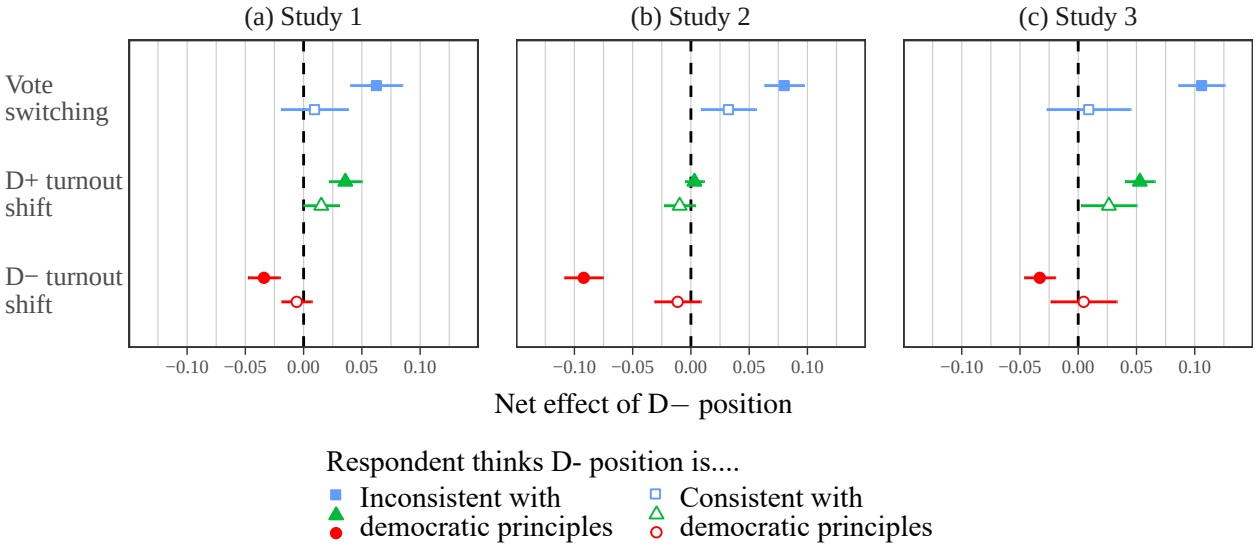
turnout contributes 30 and 32 percent of the vote margin shift, while at the two highest levels it contributes 49 and 35 percent.

6. The Importance of Understanding Democratic Principles

We next examine how the results vary according to voters' understanding of democratic principles. In order for a voter to receive utility or disutility from voting for a candidate who has violated democratic principles (δ), a voter recognize the violation. In practice, voters vary in their understanding of democracy (Shin 2017; Davis et al. 2022) and will not necessarily recognize even a clear violation of democratic principles as being undemocratic. In extreme cases, they may even think that undemocratic actions are taken in order to strengthen democracy. Yet even neutrality on a democratic principles should neutralize one's willingness to punish a candidate for violating it (Hall et al. 2026). Consequently, a respondent who does not recognize an action as violating democratic principles should not punish it, choosing as if $\mathrm{D}_j^- = 0$ even though $\mathrm{D}_j^- = 1$.

To measure beliefs about the violations of democratic principles, we turn to a battery of questions about how our respondents understand democratic principles. Prior to the candidate choice tasks — and in Study 1, in a separate wave of the survey fielded two weeks before the survey waves containing the candidate choices — respondents answered a series of questions designed to test their understanding of democratic principles. Included in this battery were the specific violations that were to be included in the subsequent candidate choices, framed using neutral language that could describe any political system. For example, the gerrymandering item read "The largest party redrew legislative districts in order to secure its control of the legislature for the next term." Respondents rated each violation on a 1 to 10 scale from "not at all democratic" to "completely democratic." About 70 to 80 percent of respondents rated each violation as inconsistent with democratic principles (between 1 and 5). This leaves about 20 to 30 percent who viewed each violation as being consistent with democratic principles.

Figure 7: Effects by respondent's understanding of democratic principles



We find strong evidence that both turnout and vote choice effects vary according to people's understanding of democratic principles. Among respondents who rated the violations as inconsistent with democratic principles, there is strong evidence of turnout and vote choice effects that work against the D− candidate (Figure 7). Yet among respondents who rated the violations as neutral or consistent with democratic principles, we find much smaller effects that often fail to attain statistical significance. This suggests that for both turnout and vote choice, the public's willingness to serve as a democratic check is conditional on its understanding of the mapping between a candidate's actions and democratic principles.

7. Discussion

We find that turnout can act as a mechanism for electoral punishment of candidates who violate democratic principles. Our model and experiments find two distinct turnout mechanisms: backlash among democratically minded voters who would otherwise have stayed home, and disengagment among those who would otherwise have voted for the less democratic candidate. As polarization increases, vote-switching and backlash become less important while disengagement becomes more important. This suggests that peeling off an aspiring autocrat's support base can be

a fruitful strategy. Even if core supporters cannot be persuaded to support the opposition, recognizing the threat to democracy could also motivate them to stay home.

These findings invite some natural questions about the political events our studies were fielded alongside. If turnout can serve as a democratic check in the United States, why didn't it save the day in recent presidential elections in which Americans chose between a candidate with clear authoritarian tendencies (Trump, who clearly signaled during the 2016 Republican primary that he would dispute any election he lost) and an alternative who was more committed to democratic principles (Clinton, Biden, and Harris)? For one thing, it is not clear that turnout effects did not work in a pro-democratic direction in these elections. Elections are determined by multiple factors. Trump lost two of these popular votes, winning more votes only in an environment that was exceptionally tough for incumbents worldwide (Wake et al. 2024). Turnout clearly was not sufficient to defeat the Trump in these cases but there is no basis to conclude that it did not work against him, or that it did. The counterfactual nature of the question—especially biting because it concerns the joint distribution of voters' schoices—is precisely what makes a design like our paired candidate choice experiments necessary.

Another point of consistency between our results and contemporaneous events is the importance of how voters perceive the mapping between a politician's actions and democratic principles. A large majority of Trump's supporters are convinced that the 2020 election was stolen (Graham and Yair 2024) that Trump bears no responsibility for the events of January 6, 2021 (News 2021), and that Trump is not a threat to democracy (Georgetown 2026, p198). In our experiments, voters who do not perceive a candidate as violating undemocratic principles do not respond via either turnout or vote-switching. To the extent that Trump's earlier supporters were not convinced that Trump threatened democracy, there is no reason to expect them to disengage or switch sides.

Survey data from the 2020-24 election cycles are consistent with the notion that Trump supporters' perceptions of his attacks on democracy insulated him from disengagement in 2024. In addition to containing contemporaneous measures of vote choice and validated measures of

Table 4: 2020 Trump voters' 2024 action by 2020 election belief

2020 belief	2024 action	Percent	SE
Biden won	Abstain	27.0	4.4
	Vote Harris	9.2	2.8
	Vote Trump	63.8	4.5
Trump won	Abstain	13.1	2.4
	Vote Harris	0.7	0.6
	Vote Trump	86.2	2.5

turnout, the 2020-24 ANES panel survey includes a question about whether Biden or Trump was the legitimate winner of the 2020 election. As this is the foundational claim on which Trump's election attacks rest, it can be reasonably used to approximate whether a voter views Trump as a threat to democracy or as neutral to beneficial. For 2020 Trump voters, Table 4 displays how beliefs about the 2020 election predict 2024 electoral choices. Among those who believe that Trump won in 2020, 86% voted for Trump again in 2024, 13% abstained, and less than 1% switched from Biden to Harris. Among those who believe Biden won, 64% voted for Trump again in 2024, 27% abstained, and 9% switched sides. Each implied difference—that those who rejected Trump's claims were less likely to stick with Trump, more likely to vote-switch, and more likely to abstain—is statistically significant (Table A4). Although it is possible that voters who rejected Trump's election lies were also more prone to switch sides or abstain for other reasons, it is a descriptive fact that abstention and vote-switching were more common among onetime Trump voters who were not convinced by his attacks on the 2020 election.

In sum, turnout has an important role to play in electoral accountability for democratic erosion. Even as we confirm the conventional wisdom that democracy's supporters should aim to persuade fence-sitters and mobilize democracy-minded voters, we identify another turnout mechanism—disengagement on the part of the less democratic candidate's core supporters—that can play an especially important role in polarized societies. All of these mechanisms are conditional on how the electorate perceives the mapping between a politician's actions and democratic principles, highlighting the importance of elite framing and public opinion.

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Supplemental Material for

Turning Out for Democratic Principles?

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A Survey Information

Study 1

Oversight: The study was reviewed and approved by the [REDACTED] Institutional Review Board (#2000028940).

Population: Respondents were recruited through Lucid Marketplace, a nonprobability convenience sample vendor. To be eligible respondents had to consent to participate, be 18 years or older, reside in the United States, and pass a Captcha and an attention check.

Recruitment: For wave 1, we recruited 7,670 respondents on September 15-16, 2020. The survey contained demographic information and pre-treatment measures of views on democracy. Of these, 7,165 agreed to participate and 6,154 completed the survey. Waves 2 and 3 contained the candidate choices and additional background variables. After screening out inattentive respondents from wave 1, we invited 4,483 respondents to participate in wave 2 on September 29-October 9, 2020. Of these, 1,544 entered the survey and 1,290 completed it. After excluding 9 exceptionally fast responses, 1,281 respondents were invited to participate in wave 3 on October 6-22, 2020 (respondents who completed wave 2 after October 6 were invited in a second round of invitations). Due to a vendor error, ineligible respondents were also invited. Of the 1,702 respondents who entered wave 3, 1,358 completed it.

Response time and compensation: We paid the vendor $1 per response in wave 1 and $2 per response in waves 2 and 3. The vendor distributes this compensation to respondents in a variety of ways including points that can be exchanged for gift cards and discount programs. The median response time was 11 minutes, 5 seconds in wave 1; 9 minutes, 27 seconds in wave 2; and 12 minutes, 38 seconds in wave 3

Full text: See replication file at [DOI TO BE INSERTED]..

Study 2

Oversight: The study was reviewed and approved by the [REDACTED] Institutional Review Board (#2000028940).

Population: Respondents were recruited through YouGov, a nonprobability convenience sample vendor. To be eligible respondents had to consent to participate, be 18 years or older, and reside in the United States.

Recruitment: For wave 1, we were allocated 1,000 of the 60,000 respondents who completed the first wave of the CES between October 5 and November 7, 2022. Of these, 850 completed the second wave between November 11 and December 14, 2022.

Response time and compensation: The vendor pays respondents in points, which can be exchanged for rewards like gift cards and discount programs. The median response time for our respondents, including the CES common content questions, was 29 minutes, 43 seconds in wave 1 and 17

minutes, 39 seconds in wave 2.

Full text: See replication file at [DOI TO BE INSERTED]..

For more information, see Schaffner et al. (2023).

Study 3

Oversight: The study was reviewed and approved by the [REDACTED] Institutional Review Board (#2000028940).

Population: Respondents were recruited through YouGov, a nonprobability convenience sample vendor. To be eligible respondents had to consent to participate, be 18 years or older, and reside in the United States.

Recruitment: For wave 1, we were allocated 1,000 of the 60,000 respondents who completed the first wave of the CES between October 2 and November 1, 2024. Of these, 804 completed the second wave between November 7 and December 8, 2024.

Response time and compensation: The vendor pays respondents in points, which can be exchanged for rewards like gift cards and discount programs. The median response time for our respondents, including the CES common content questions, was 28 minutes, 49 seconds in wave 1 and 18 minutes, 50 seconds in wave 2.

Full text: See replication file at [DOI TO BE INSERTED].

For more information, see Schaffner et al. (2025).

B Experimental Design

Study 1

Each respondent made seven candidate choices. The choices were repeated three times, once in wave 2 and twice in wave 3. All attributes were identical across the three iterations except for the democracy attribute, which sometimes varied.

Attribute	Randomization	Values
Party	None	One candidate Democrat, one candidate Republican
Policy	Each candidate took one social position and one economic position. Both candidates took positions in the same policy area. Based on each ratings of the policies in each area, we ranked the policies from 0-3. With two policy areas, a candidate's maximum advantage was 6. Each respondent was randomly assigned seven policy differences from the following 12 possibilities: • Two candidate pairs with policy differences of 3, 4, 5, and 6 (eight total). • Four candidate pairs with policy differences of 0, 1, or 2. These attributes were the same in every iteration of the choices. *Respondents from states without an income and/or corporate tax saw wording that aligned with state policy.	*Education finance (economic)* • Increase state aid to poor school districts only. • Increase state aid to local school districts and prioritize poor school districts. • Increase state aid across all local school districts. • Cut state aid across all local school districts *Tax rates (economic)** • Increase the state income tax on households earning over $250,000 and increase the state corporate tax. • Increase the state income tax on households earning over $250,000. • Cut the state income tax for all households. • Eliminate the state income tax. *Immigration (social)* • Local police should not help federal authorities to enforce immigration laws. • Local police should turn over to federal authorities only illegal immigrants accused of violent crimes. • Local police should turn over to federal authorities every illegal immigrant they encounter. • Local police should aggressively search for illegal immigrants and turn them over to federal authorities. *Marijuana (social)* • Marijuana should be legal for recreational use and sold freely. • Marijuana should be legal for recreational use and only sold in state-licensed dispensaries. • Marijuana should only be legal for medical use. • Marijuana should be illegal for everyone. No exceptions.
Age	Draw a random integer with equal probability.	35 to 69
Gender	Draw from a distribution.	Man (p=5/8), Woman (p=3/8)
Profession	Draw one of eight possible professions with equal probability.	Business executive, Small business owner, Prosecutor, Lawyer, Farmer, Legislative staffer, Teacher, Served in the army
Experience	Age minus a random integer drawn with equal probability.	24 to 31

Attribute	Randomization	Values
Democracy	In each candidate choice, one candidate was assigned a D- position and the other candidate was assigned a generic position. Each choice was presented three times: once in wave 2 and twice in wave 3 (with a battery of questions in between the two iterations). In each iteration the D- candidates were randomly assigned to reveal their D- position (1), or hide it and took a generic position (0). Each D- candidate was randomly assigned one of the following sequences: 010, 011, 100, 101. This means that between the first and second iteration the D- candidate always switches between hiding and revealing, with no control-control scenarios. To match the design of studies 2 and 3, only the first and third iteration of each choice are used.	*Civil liberties* • Said the [own party] governor should prosecute journalists who accuse him of misconduct without revealing sources. • Said the [own party] governor should ban far-[opposite side of political spectrum] group rallies in the state capital. *Checks and balances* • Said the [own party] governor should rule by executive order if [opposite party] legislators don't cooperate. • Said the [own party] governor should ignore unfavorable court rulings by [opposite party]-appointed judges. *Electoral fairness* • Supported a proposal to reduce the number of polling stations in areas that support [opposite party]s. • Supported a redistricting plan that gives [own party]s 2 extra seats despite a decline in the polls. • Supported a redistricting plan that gives [own party]s 10 extra seats despite a decline in the polls. *Generic* • Served on a committee that establishes the state legislature's schedule for each session. • Worked on a plan to change the state legislature's committee structure. • Served on the state's Board of Elections, which handles local, state, and federal elections. • Submitted a proposal that would change the state's record keeping laws and practices. • Served on a subcommittee that reviews the structure of state legislative staff offices. • Served on a committee that approves proposed changes to legislative procedure. • Participated in a working group on using program evaluation to inform policymaking.

Study 2

Each respondent made twelve candidate choices. The choices were repeated two times, once in wave 1 and once in wave 2. All attributes were identical across the three iterations except for the democracy attribute.

Attribute	Randomization	Values
Party	None	One candidate Democrat, one candidate Republican
Policy	Each candidate was randomly assigned one social position and one economic position. Within each policy area, Democrats could take only the first two positions	*Tax rates (economic)* • Increase the federal income tax on households earning over $250,000 and increase the federal corporate tax. • Increase the federal income tax on households earning over $250,000.

Attribute	Randomization	Values
Policy (continued)	listed and Republicans could take only the second two positions.	• Cut the federal income tax for all households. • Eliminate the federal income tax. *Immigration (social)* • State authorities should not help federal authorities to enforce immigration laws. • State authorities should turn over to federal authorities only illegal immigrants accused of violent crimes. • State authorities should turn over to federal authorities every illegal immigrant they encounter. • State authorities should aggressively search for illegal immigrants and turn them over to federal authorities.
Democracy	For each respondent, across the twelve choices, six were randomly assigned to have a D- candidate. For partisans, the D- candidate was always a copartisan. For independents, the D- candidate was chosen randomly. In each iteration of each choice, the D- position was independently randomly assigned to be revealed or hidden.	*Civil liberties* • Said we should ban political rallies by groups that promote extreme political views. *Checks and balances* • Said we should expand presidents' powers to govern without Congress. • Said presidents should be free to ignore court rulings. *Electoral fairness* • Supported a redistricting plan that guaranteed his party more seats in the U.S. Congress than warranted by its vote share. • Said we should reduce the number of polling stations in counties that voted against our party. • Said his party's candidate should refuse to concede defeat in the next presidential election. *Generic* • Served on a committee that establishes legislative schedule. • Worked on a plan to change the legislative committee structure. • Submitted a proposal that would change record-keeping laws and practices. • Served on a committee that reviews the structure of legislative staff offices. • Served on a committee that approves changes to legislative procedures. • Participated in a working group on using program evaluation to inform policymaking.

Study 3

Each respondent made twelve candidate choices. The choices were repeated two times, once in wave 1 and once in wave 2. All attributes were identical across the three iterations except for the democracy attribute.

Attribute	Randomization	Values
Party	None	One candidate Democrat, one candidate Republican
Policy	Each candidate was randomly assigned one social position and one economic position with equal probability. These were the same in every iteration of the choices.	*Tax rates (economic)* • Increase the federal income tax on households earning over $250,000 and increase the federal corporate tax. • Cut the federal income tax on households earning less than $250,000. • Cut the federal income tax for all households. *Trade (economic)* • Raise tariffs on all imports from China. • Raise tariffs on imports from China in strategic sectors, like steel and semiconductors. • Keep tariffs on imports from China at current levels. *Immigration (social)* • State authorities should not help federal authorities to enforce immigration laws. • State authorities should turn over to federal authorities only illegal immigrants accused of violent crimes. • State authorities should turn over to federal authorities every illegal immigrant they encounter. *Abortion (social)* • Always allow a woman the right to an abortion as a matter of choice. • Permit abortion only in case of rape, incest or when the woman's life is in danger. • Make abortions illegal in all circumstances.
Democracy	In each candidate choice, one candidate was randomly assigned a D- position and the other candidate was assigned a generic position. For each respondent, across the twelve choices, three D- candidates were Republicans and three were Democrats. In each iteration of each choice, the D- position was independently randomly assigned to be revealed or hidden.	*Civil liberties* • Said we should ban political rallies by groups that oppose his party's policies. *Checks and balances* • We should expand presidents' powers to govern without Congress. • Presidents should be free to ignore court rulings by biased judges. *Electoral fairness* • Supported a redistricting plan that guaranteed his party more seats in the U.S. Congress than warranted by its vote share. • We should reduce the number of polling stations in counties that voted against our party. • Said his party's candidate should refuse to concede defeat in the 2024 presidential election. *Generic* • Served on a committee that establishes legislative schedule. • Worked on a plan to change the legislative committee structure. • Submitted a proposal that would change record-keeping laws and practices. • Served on a committee that reviews the structure of legislative staff offices. • Served on a committee that approves changes to legislative procedures. • Participated in a working group on using program evaluation to inform policymaking.

C Supporting Tables

Table A1: Tabular Version of Figure 5

Study	Mechanism	Diff.	Est.	SE	2.5%	97.5%
Meta-analysis	D+ turnout (backlash)	-0.9	-0.017	0.010	-0.037	0.004
		-0.7	0.010	0.023	-0.034	0.054
		-0.5	0.019	0.015	-0.010	0.048
		-0.3	0.058	0.019	0.021	0.095
		-0.1	0.041	0.012	0.018	0.064
		0.1	0.024	0.016	-0.007	0.055
		0.3	0.023	0.015	-0.007	0.052
		0.5	0.016	0.014	-0.011	0.043
		0.7	-0.001	0.003	-0.007	0.005
		0.9	0.020	0.016	-0.011	0.052
	D- turnout (disenga-gement)	-0.9	-0.003	0.008	-0.018	0.013
		-0.7	-0.013	0.011	-0.034	0.008
		-0.5	-0.016	0.009	-0.033	0.002
		-0.3	-0.033	0.020	-0.073	0.007
		-0.1	-0.026	0.011	-0.047	-0.005
		0.1	-0.026	0.009	-0.042	-0.009
		0.3	-0.050	0.011	-0.071	-0.029
		0.5	-0.071	0.012	-0.095	-0.048
		0.7	-0.110	0.018	-0.145	-0.076
		0.9	-0.084	0.038	-0.158	-0.009
	Vote-switching	-0.9	0.014	0.025	-0.036	0.064
		-0.7	-0.021	0.021	-0.062	0.020
		-0.5	0.040	0.017	0.006	0.074
		-0.3	0.054	0.024	0.008	0.101
		-0.1	0.072	0.026	0.021	0.122
		0.1	0.065	0.020	0.026	0.105
		0.3	0.118	0.015	0.090	0.147
		0.5	0.078	0.012	0.056	0.101
		0.7	0.088	0.016	0.057	0.120
		0.9	0.069	0.016	0.037	0.101
Study 1	D+ turnout (backlash)	-0.9	0.003	0.028	-0.053	0.059
		-0.7	0.051	0.041	-0.031	0.134
		-0.5	0.028	0.026	-0.024	0.081
		-0.3	0.055	0.024	0.008	0.102
		-0.1	0.035	0.012	0.012	0.058
		0.1	0.022	0.009	0.005	0.040
		0.3	0.026	0.019	-0.010	0.063
		0.5	0.017	0.019	-0.021	0.054
		0.7	0.001	0.015	-0.028	0.030
		0.9	0.051	0.019	0.012	0.089
	D- turnout (disenga-gement)	-0.9	0.002	0.012	-0.021	0.025
		-0.7	-0.021	0.013	-0.046	0.005
		-0.5	0.010	0.021	-0.031	0.052
		-0.3	-0.031	0.017	-0.064	0.002
		-0.1	-0.013	0.010	-0.032	0.005
		0.1	-0.011	0.009	-0.029	0.007
		0.3	-0.037	0.019	-0.075	0.000
		0.5	-0.052	0.025	-0.102	-0.002
		0.7	-0.083	0.029	-0.141	-0.025
		0.9	-0.041	0.038	-0.118	0.036
	Vote-switching	-0.9	-0.013	0.040	-0.093	0.066
		-0.7	-0.010	0.043	-0.095	0.076
		-0.5	0.019	0.031	-0.043	0.081
		-0.3	0.079	0.032	0.017	0.142
		-0.1	0.026	0.022	-0.018	0.070
		0.1	0.040	0.019	0.004	0.077
		0.3	0.091	0.035	0.022	0.159
		0.5	0.050	0.033	-0.015	0.115
		0.7	0.073	0.030	0.013	0.133
		0.9	0.100	0.029	0.042	0.157
Study 2	D+ turnout (backlash)	-0.9	-0.020	0.011	-0.046	0.006
		-0.7	-0.021	0.029	-0.082	0.040
		-0.5	-0.011	0.037	-0.086	0.063
		-0.3	0.028	0.019	-0.011	0.066
		-0.1	0.026	0.013	0.000	0.051
		0.1	-0.002	0.010	-0.022	0.017
		0.3	0.000	0.006	-0.012	0.012
		0.5	-0.003	0.007	-0.016	0.010
		0.7	-0.002	0.003	-0.008	0.005
		0.9	0.000	0.002	-0.004	0.005
	D- turnout (disenga-gement)	-0.9	-0.050	0.029	-0.116	0.015
		-0.7	0.018	0.032	-0.048	0.085
		-0.5	-0.041	0.024	-0.089	0.007
		-0.3	-0.074	0.021	-0.115	-0.033
		-0.1	-0.052	0.019	-0.089	-0.015
		0.1	-0.041	0.013	-0.066	-0.017
		0.3	-0.065	0.021	-0.107	-0.024
		0.5	-0.078	0.017	-0.110	-0.045
		0.7	-0.126	0.020	-0.166	-0.086
		0.9	-0.136	0.020	-0.175	-0.098
	Vote-switching	-0.9	0.045	0.038	-0.041	0.132
		-0.7	-0.028	0.027	-0.084	0.027
		-0.5	0.057	0.047	-0.036	0.151
		-0.3	0.006	0.028	-0.049	0.062
		-0.1	0.090	0.032	0.026	0.154
		0.1	0.049	0.014	0.022	0.076
		0.3	0.115	0.021	0.075	0.156
		0.5	0.080	0.013	0.053	0.106
		0.7	0.094	0.020	0.054	0.133
		0.9	0.060	0.015	0.030	0.090
Study 3	D+ turnout (backlash)	-0.9	-0.001	0.069	-0.141	0.139
		-0.7	0.022	0.039	-0.057	0.102
		-0.5	0.022	0.020	-0.017	0.061
		-0.3	0.090	0.019	0.053	0.126
		-0.1	0.067	0.016	0.036	0.098
		0.1	0.052	0.009	0.035	0.069
		0.3	0.047	0.012	0.023	0.071
		0.5	0.039	0.012	0.015	0.063
		0.7	0.003	0.021	-0.038	0.044
		0.9	0.025	0.022	-0.019	0.068
	D- turnout (disenga-gement)	-0.9	0.001	0.011	-0.021	0.023
		-0.7	-0.002	0.024	-0.052	0.047
		-0.5	-0.018	0.011	-0.039	0.004
		-0.3	-0.003	0.010	-0.023	0.017
		-0.1	-0.026	0.015	-0.057	0.004
		0.1	-0.029	0.010	-0.048	-0.010
		0.3	-0.050	0.016	-0.081	-0.018
		0.5	-0.074	0.024	-0.121	-0.027
		0.7	-0.101	0.061	-0.222	0.020
		0.9	-0.033	0.070	-0.175	0.110
	Vote-switching	-0.9	-0.007	0.068	-0.144	0.130
		-0.7	-0.008	0.055	-0.119	0.103
		-0.5	0.048	0.023	0.002	0.094
		-0.3	0.077	0.024	0.029	0.125
		-0.1	0.103	0.023	0.058	0.148
		0.1	0.104	0.013	0.078	0.130
		0.3	0.138	0.026	0.088	0.188
		0.5	0.095	0.032	0.033	0.158
		0.7	0.100	0.060	-0.021	0.220
		0.9	0.014	0.093	-0.177	0.204

Table A2: Tabular Version of Figure 6

Mechanism	Polarization	Estimate
Backlash	0.1	0.033
(D+ turnout)	0.3	0.040
	0.5	0.017
	0.7	0.004
	0.9	0.002
Disengagement	0.1	0.026
(D- turnout)	0.3	0.041
	0.5	0.043
	0.7	0.062
	0.9	0.043
Vote-switching	0.1	0.137
	0.3	0.173
	0.5	0.119
	0.7	0.068
	0.9	0.084

Table A3: Tabular Version of Figure 7

Study	Opinion	Mechanism	Estimate	SE	2.5%	97.5%
Study 1	Bad for Democracy	Vote switching	0.065	0.011	0.043	0.087
		D+ turnout shift	0.032	0.007	0.019	0.046
		D- turnout shift	-0.034	0.007	-0.047	-0.020
	Good for Democracy	Vote switching	0.013	0.015	-0.016	0.042
		D+ turnout shift	0.017	0.008	0.002	0.032
		D- turnout shift	-0.007	0.007	-0.020	0.005
Study 2	Bad for Democracy	Vote switching	0.077	0.009	0.060	0.094
		D+ turnout shift	0.003	0.004	-0.005	0.011
		D- turnout shift	-0.091	0.008	-0.108	-0.075
	Good for Democracy	Vote switching	0.032	0.012	0.009	0.055
		D+ turnout shift	-0.009	0.007	-0.022	0.004
		D- turnout shift	-0.010	0.010	-0.030	0.009
Study 3	Bad for Democracy	Vote switching	0.106	0.010	0.086	0.125
		D+ turnout shift	0.053	0.006	0.040	0.066
		D- turnout shift	-0.033	0.007	-0.046	-0.020
	Good for Democracy	Vote switching	0.007	0.018	-0.028	0.042
		D+ turnout shift	0.024	0.012	0.001	0.047
		D- turnout shift	0.009	0.014	-0.018	0.037

Table A4: Regression Version of Table 4

	Stick with Trump	Abstain	Switch to Harris
(Intercept)	0.862^{***}	0.131^{***}	0.007
	(0.025)	(0.024)	(0.006)
'Reject Big Lie'	-0.223^{***}	0.139^{**}	0.084^{**}
	(0.052)	(0.050)	(0.029)
Adj. R^2	0.066	0.029	0.043
Num. obs.	653	653	653

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

D Additional Results

Figure A1: Effects by D$^-$ Position

Study 1

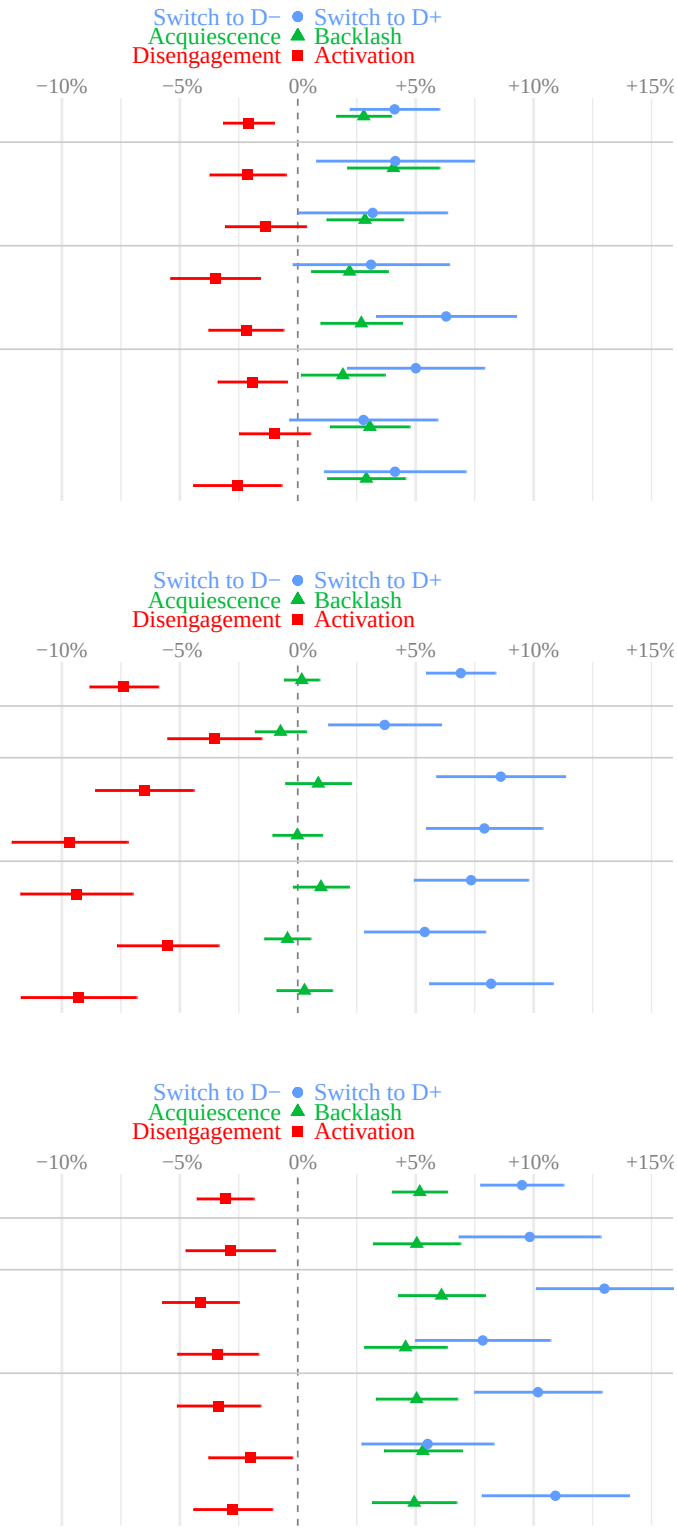
Democratic principle and violation		Net effect on... Vote switch −ing	D+ turnout shift	D− turnout shift
All	All	+4.1* (1.0)	+2.8* (0.6)	−2.1* (0.5)
Civil liberties	Ban protests	+4.1* (1.7)	+4.1* (1.0)	−2.1* (0.8)
	Prosecute journalists	+3.2* (1.6)	+2.8* (0.8)	−1.4 (0.9)
Checks & balances	Executive rule	+3.1 (1.7)	+2.2* (0.8)	−3.5* (1.0)
	Ignore court rulings	+6.3* (1.5)	+2.7* (0.9)	−2.2* (0.8)
Electoral fairness	Close polling places	+5.0* (1.5)	+1.9* (0.9)	−1.9* (0.7)
	Gerryman−dering (2)	+2.8 (1.6)	+3.1* (0.9)	−1.0 (0.8)
	Gerryman−dering (10)	+4.1* (1.5)	+2.9* (0.8)	−2.6* (1.0)

Study 2

Democratic principle and violation		Net effect on... Vote switch −ing	D+ turnout shift	D− turnout shift
All	All	+6.9* (0.7)	+0.2 (0.4)	−7.4* (0.7)
Civil liberties	Ban protests	+3.7* (1.2)	−0.7 (0.6)	−3.5* (1.0)
Checks & balances	Executive rule	+8.6* (1.4)	+0.9 (0.7)	−6.5* (1.1)
	Ignore court rulings	+7.9* (1.3)	0.0 (0.5)	−9.7* (1.3)
Electoral fairness	Close polling places	+7.3* (1.2)	+1.0 (0.6)	−9.4* (1.2)
	Gerryman−dering	+5.4* (1.3)	−0.4 (0.5)	−5.5* (1.1)
	Refuse to concede	+8.2* (1.3)	+0.3 (0.6)	−9.3* (1.2)

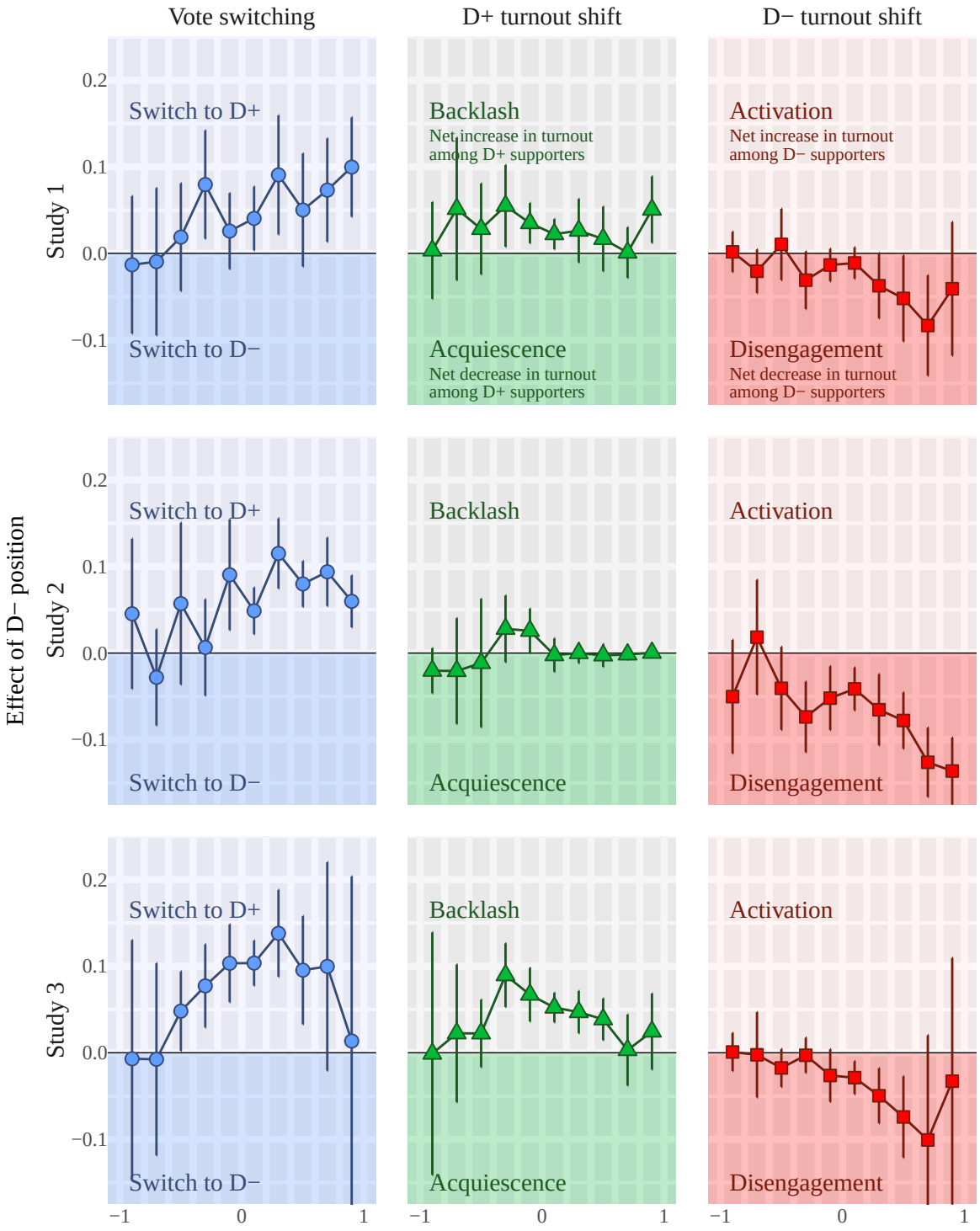
Study 3

Democratic principle and violation		Net effect on... Vote switch −ing	D+ turnout shift	D− turnout shift
All	All	+9.5* (0.9)	+5.2* (0.6)	−3.1* (0.6)
Civil liberties	Ban protests	+9.8* (1.5)	+5.0* (0.9)	−2.9* (1.0)
Checks & balances	Executive rule	+13.0* (1.5)	+6.1* (0.9)	−4.1* (0.8)
	Ignore court rulings	+7.8* (1.5)	+4.6* (0.9)	−3.4* (0.9)
Electoral fairness	Close polling places	+10.2* (1.4)	+5.0* (0.9)	−3.4* (0.9)
	Gerryman−dering	+5.5* (1.4)	+5.3* (0.8)	−2.0* (0.9)
	Refuse to concede	+10.9* (1.6)	+4.9* (0.9)	−2.8* (0.8)



Note: Figure displays the effect of each separate D$^-$ position on vote-switching, D$^+$ turnout shifts, and D$^-$ turnout shifts. Table contains point estimates with standard errors in parentheses, $^*p < 0.05$. Coefficient plot depicts the same estimates with 95 percent confidence intervals. The top row ("all") exactly matches the estimates in Figure 4.

Figure A2: Study-by-Study Version of Figure 5



Note: Figure is a study-by-study version of main text Figure 5. The y-axis displays the estimated effect of a D^- position on vote-switching (left panel), D^+ turnout shifts (middle panel), and D^- turnout shifts (right panel). The x-axis displays a measure of the D^- candidate's dis/advantage in terms of policy (Studies 2 and 3) or combination of party and policies (Study 1). -1 indicates that the D^+ candidate has the largest possible advantage. 1 indicates that the D^- candidate has the largest possible advantage.