

Sounding the Alarm:
Transgressing Democratic Norms and the Effects of Political Pushback

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Abstract

In competitive democracies political norm violations rarely occur in a vacuum; nor do citizens experience them as such. Rather, transgressions are constantly being mediated for the public by political elites across the political spectrum. To date, however, there has been little systematic analysis of the role that political pushback by elites plays in shaping citizens' reactions to leaders who flout democratic norms. Our proposed research seeks to fill this gap. We draw on literatures in political behavior, social psychology, and game theory to distill a series of plausible testable implications about the varying effects of elite political pushback. The second part of the proposal develops a novel survey experiment designed to evaluate and to adjudicate among these alternative hypotheses.

In competitive democracies political norm violations rarely occur in a vacuum; nor do citizens experience them as such. Rather, transgressions are constantly being mediated for the public by political elites across the political spectrum. Political elites matter in this context precisely because what constitutes a political norm violation is not always clear: they require additional, specialized knowledge to interpret compared with other political actions about which the general public might have more information (Clayton, et al 2020). Given this, there are strong a priori reasons to believe that elite cues can heavily influence citizens' assessment of which actions taken by leaders constitute a political norm violation and how such assessments are likely to affect voters' perceptions of leaders and parties alike. To date, however, there has been little systematic analysis of the role that political elites play in mediating citizens' reactions to leaders who flout democratic norms. Our proposed research seeks to fill this gap.

Whereas much of the current literature on the problem of democratic backsliding focuses directly on citizens' values and their willingness to defend democracy against would-be autocratic leaders (Foa and Mounk 2016; Carey, et al. 2019; Svobik and Graham 2019; Svobik 2020; Nalepa, et al. 2019), our proposal shifts the focus to encompass the political opposition's role in shaping citizens' perceptions and reactions to such norm violations. Specifically, we concentrate on exploring three sets of related, but distinct, questions:

- When is pushback against a leader's bid to erode democratic norms most effective?
- Does partisan pushback succeed in altering the public's perceptions about an aggrandizing president, or does it tend to backfire and rebound to the leader's benefit and hurt the party that sounded the alarm?
- Is bipartisan political pushback necessarily a more effective strategy for sanctioning leaders who violates democratic norms?

The proposal developed here is empirical, but rooted in a broader theoretical project that aims to elucidate the strategic calculus behind political pushback to executive aggrandizement (also see Gamboa 2018; Przeworski and Luo 2018). In particular, our findings will help to ground key assumptions about the relative costs to party elites across the political spectrum for challenging a leaders' attempts to transgress key democratic norms. This is a vital step in developing a theory of how checks and balances operates under polarization, and thus understanding the extent to which pushback succeeds or fails in halting democratic erosion.

Below, we draw on a diverse set of literatures in political behavior, social psychology, and game theory to distill a series of plausible testable implications about the varying effects of elite pushback. The second part of the proposal develops a novel survey experiment designed to evaluate and to adjudicate among these alternative hypotheses.

Framing, Backlash, and Reputation

There is substantial evidence that the effectiveness of elite cues generally depends on polarization and partisanship. The framing literature in American politics consistently finds that individuals are generally more responsive to narratives offered by their preferred party in forming their issue positions, especially in low-information environments and when parties are polarized on an issue (Bullock 2011, Druckman 2015). Previous studies suggest that source credibility matters even for factual beliefs (Nyhan et al 2017, Druckman et al 2019), as individuals are more likely to disregard information coming from an untrusted source and more likely to trust their preferred party. Party cues affect subjective judgments about a range of other outcomes, from the state of the economy (Bisgaard et al 2018) to evaluations of candidate quality and performance while in office (Mummolo et al 2018 & Donovan et al 2019). However, the influence of co-partisan elites is not unlimited: research has also found that individuals rely on the party elite's opinion less when the policy distance between the voter and the party elites grows (Peterson 2019).

Applied to the problem of democratic backsliding, the upshot of the framing literature is that partisan pushback against a leader who violates democratic norms will be effective, but that such effects will likely be largely confined to citizens who are already favorably disposed to the source of the opposition. In other words, in the polarized context of contemporary American politics a charge made by a Democratic congresswoman that President Trump has violated a political norm will disproportionately help to convince citizens who are already identified as Democrats that the President has committed a transgression.

As well, findings from social psychology on third-party reactions to justice and mistreatment, indicate that out-group elite expressions of incivility or threats to legally sanction a politician on the basis that they violated certain norms can evoke feelings of status threat among the supporters of the politician (Terman 2019).

Applying these lessons to a polarized democracy, this literature suggests that partisan opposition pushback may thus not only fail to convince a leader's supporters that she should be sanctioned, but actually serve to produce a backlash of increased support for the leader who violates norms. If this is operative in current American politics, we would expect that pushback from Democrats would backfire among Republican supporters, such that they would be *less* inclined to see Trump's actions in a negative light precisely because pushback is coming from the opposition party.

There are also good reasons to suspect that the effects of partisan pushback may extend beyond citizens' perception of the president's behavior and to perceptions about the parties themselves. In a recent discussion of political norms, Azari (2020) argues co-partisan pushback is essentially

now a form of norm-breaking in itself and, hence, implies that any pushback against Trump is especially risky for Republican elites.

Game theory provides a somewhat different perspective on the potential costs of pushback to both parties. Cheap talk models, in particular, teach us that because parties have opposing electoral incentives to fabricate (in the case of the opposition) or suppress (in the case of co-partisans) information about a leader, then voters should update negatively about *both* parties' reputations whenever they act according to their partisan interests. For example, in their signaling model of the production of political scandals, Dzuida and Howell (2020) deduce that both parties will suffer reputation costs from partisan scandals (scandals in which only the opposition alleges wrong-doing), whereas the president's reputation suffers only when allegations against her are made by both parties.

Taken together, the literature thus identifies six potential sets of relationships between the type of elite pushback (partisan or bi-partisan) and different citizens' perceptions of the President, the President's party, and the opposition party.

Partisan Reinforcement. Opposition partisan pushback increases citizens' negative perceptions of the President among citizens who support the opposition party.

Partisan Backlash. Opposition partisan pushback increases citizens' positive perceptions of the President among citizens who support the opposition party.

Partisan Reputation: Partisan pushback increases citizens' negative perceptions of both parties

Bipartisan Backlash: Bipartisan pushback increases citizens' negative perceptions of the President's party among citizens who support the President.

Bipartisan Reinforcement: Bipartisan pushback increases citizens' negative perceptions of the President.

Bipartisan Reputation: Bipartisan pushback increases citizens' positive perceptions of the President's party.

In the appendix, we also include an additional set of auxiliary hypotheses about heterogeneous effects by strength of partisanship, political knowledge and presidential approval alongside with effects on emotions.

Experiment Design

Below, we elaborate a series of testable hypotheses and propose a survey experiment to explore the extent to which different reputation costs map on to elite pushback against democratic norm violations. Specifically, we propose to randomly expose respondents to either a partisan

pushback treatment (Treatment 1) or a bi-partisan pushback treatment (Treatment 2) and to compare perceptions of the President and the parties among different partisan groups of respondents.

To test these hypotheses, we design a survey experiment rooted in real world political events drawn from the news headlines; We use a between-subjects design in which no elite pushback constitutes the control group and the two treatments randomly assign the elite condemnation cue, with partisan pushback (i.e. the Democratic Party members only) as the first treatment, and bipartisan pushback as the second treatment.

Individuals are randomly assigned to one of the two treatment and one control groups and we plan to ask each subject to evaluate only one norm violation to avoid potential spillover effects across multiple norm violations and partisan cues (separate, but related research by Clayton et. al focuses on how successive norm violation affect an individual's perceptions about the politician and threat norms pose to democracy). Note that our design thus allows us to isolate the specific effects we are interested in exploring but may also decrease the external validity of the experiment, as subjects in the real world are likely observing multiple norm violations and multiple forms of political pushback. Respondents will also be asked the same battery of post-treatment questions about demographics, political opinions, and political knowledge (see Appendix). In the remaining sections, we discuss 1) our selection criteria for the type of political norm violation we propose, 2) the post-treatment outcome variables that we will use to assess our hypotheses 3) the specific hypotheses that we plan to evaluate, and 4) the methodological details of implementing our research design.

The norm violation will be presented as a shortened version of an actual news article about a norm violation by President Trump. The elite condemnation treatments will be reported tweets by congress members, which will be edited and anonymized versions of actual tweets from elected representatives from the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Given the nature of our study, partisan opposition and bipartisan opposition treatment refer to political elites voicing concerns about how presidential behavior impacts democracy.¹ For the sake of realism, the partisan opposition treatment only includes reference to democratic concerns but uses an alarming tone as is typical of the real tweets.

¹ We are interested in elite opposition in the form of pointing out why the said act is wrong/unusual/harmful to democracy. The content of elite messages about actual norm violations can be just pointing out to the norm the act is said to be violating, describing other negative consequences/aspects of the policy/act that are harmful, calling for action such as impeachment. There is also some variation in the language used to criticize presidential norm violations especially within Democrats' tweets, including simply stating the act is against the rule of law or it is unusual, using emotional language such as capitalized letters and exclamation points, or using ridicule.

We seek to balance two selection criteria in choosing a specific norm violation. On the one hand, we need to choose an action taken by President Trump that has received both partisan and bipartisan pushback as a meaningful norm violation. At the same time, we also want to avoid using a norm violation event that is so highly publicized and polarized that respondents have already fully made up their minds, and thus any effects of elite pushback risk being too small to detect with the current set-up.

In the survey vignette included in the appendix, we thus use the firing of Inspector General Michael Atkinson by President Trump early April 2020. In addition to its relevance to broader issues about executive aggrandizement and the president's on-going attempts to erode checks and balances, it drew opposition from both sides of the aisle; yet it was not as widely publicized as other norm violation events by Trump, especially since it coincided with the initial days of the coronavirus epidemic.

Post-treatment, we will measure all subjects' evaluations of the norm violation, perceived importance of the event, and individuals' evaluation as to president's commitment to democracy as well as two sets of measures of trust towards political parties. All outcome variables will be measured on a standard Likert 4-point scale and we will randomize the order of these questions:

(O1) Evaluation of norm violations by the president: Do you think it is appropriate or inappropriate for the president to fire Inspector General Atkinson?... (Entirely Appropriate, Mostly Appropriate, Mostly Inappropriate, Entirely Inappropriate)

(O2) How much respect do you think Donald Trump has for this country's democratic institutions and traditions?... (A great deal, A fair amount, A little, None at all)

(O3) How important do you think was the president's decision to fire Inspector General Atkinson?... (Important, Mostly Important, Somewhat Important, Unimportant)

We use two measures of trust towards political parties: general levels of trust toward party members in Congress and trust in the accuracy of the information provided by the party members:

(O4a) How much do you trust the accuracy of the information that you get about the government from the Democratic members of Congress?... (A great deal, A fair amount, A little, Not at all)

(O4b) How much do you trust the accuracy of the information that you get about the government from the Republican members of Congress?... (A great deal, A fair amount, A little, Not at all)

(O5a) How much confidence, if any, do you have in the Democratic members of Congress to act in the best interests of the public?... (A great deal, A fair amount, A little, None at all)

(O5b) How much confidence, if any, do you have in the Democratic members of Congress to act in the best interests of the public? (A great deal, A fair amount, A little, None at all)

As such the experiment design tests the hypotheses by comparing following groups: (All predictions are within partisan group (Democrats or Republicans) and compared to : 1- control, 2- partisan, 3- bipartisan). For the first three outcomes, *Appropriateness/Importance/Commitment to democracy*, the hypotheses discussed map to our outcome variables and treatment groups as follows:

Partisan Reinforcement:

H1A: Opposition partisan pushback increases citizens' perceptions that the President has committed a norm violation among Democratic voters

H1B: Opposition partisan pushback increases citizens' perceptions that among Democratic voters

H1C: Opposition partisan pushback increases citizens' perceptions that the President's commitment to democratic principles is not strong among Democratic voters

Thus we expect to find among Democratic respondents:

(1) appropriateness_control > appropriateness_partisan

(2) importance_control < importance_partisan

(3) commitment_control > commitment_partisan

Partisan Backlash:

H2A: Opposition partisan pushback decreases citizens' perceptions that President's action is inappropriate among Republican voters

H2B: Opposition partisan pushback decreases citizens' perceptions that President's action is important among Republican voters

H2C: Opposition partisan pushback decreases citizens' perceptions that President's commitment to democratic principles is not strong among Republican voters

Thus we expect to find among Republican respondents:

(1) appropriateness_control < appropriateness_partisan

(2) importance_control > importance_partisan

(3) commitment_control < commitment_partisan

Bipartisan Reinforcement:

H5A: Bipartisan pushback increases citizens' perceptions that President's action is inappropriate among Republicans and Democrats

H5B: Bipartisan pushback increases the perceived significance of president's decision among Republicans and Democrats

H5C: Bipartisan pushback increases citizens' perceptions that President's commitment to democratic principles is not strong among Republicans and Democrats

Thus we expect to find, for both Republican and Democratic respondents :

(1) appropriateness_control > appropriateness_bipartisan

(2) importance_control < importance_bipartisan

(3) commitment_control > commitment_bipartisan

As discussed above, we have two alternative predictions about the effect of opposition to presidential transgression on trust in the parties in the congress. If trust operates through purely

information channels, we expect trust in parties to decrease when there is one-sided opposition and trust in president's party to increase if there is bipartisan opposition. So we expect the following to hold:

Partisan Reputation:

H4: Trust in the Democratic Party and the Republican Party suffers when there is partisan pushback among Republican and Democratic voters

H5: Bipartisan pushback increases trust for the president's party among Republican and among Democratic voters

Among Democratic and Republican respondents:

(1) $trust_dem_control > trust_dem_partisan$

(2) $trust_rep_control > trust_rep_partisan$

(3) $trust_dem_control < trust_dem_bipartisan$

(4) $trust_rep_control < trust_rep_bipartisan$

Alternatively, if voters care about party loyalty and partisan interests, we expect voter trust in president's party to decrease following bipartisan opposition:

Bipartisan Backlash:

H3: Bipartisan pushback decreases citizens' trust in the Republican Party among Republican voters

Among Republican respondents:

(1) $trust_rep_control < trust_rep_bipartisan$

Sample Size & Power Calculation

Since we are only interested in effects by partisanship, we plan on recruiting equally-sized groups of subjects with partisan affiliation as Democrats (and Democratic leaners), Republicans (and Republican leaners). For each group, we measure 5 main outcome variables (*appropriateness, importance, commitment to democracy, trust in Democratic Party and trust in the Republican Party*) with one control and two treatment groups (no cue/partisan cue/bipartisan cue).

Since we do not have any strong expectations about the effect of elite opposition on independents' attitude, we effectively end up with 14 hypotheses for the effects of elite cues on policy support and evaluation of the president. The effects size of partisan cues are previously found to be around 3%-43% on policy support by co-partisans (Bullock 2019). We estimate the effect size to be on the conservative side of the spectrum at .05. To simplify the analysis, we assume that this effect is uniform across all groups and treatments although we acknowledge that this is an unrealistic assumption.

For the standard deviation of the first outcome, as a best approximation, we use the standard deviation in responses to executive power transgression questions from Brightline Survey Wave 9, which is around .95 for each partisan group. To get an estimate for standard deviation for trust towards each party, we use standard deviations from the survey that is a part of "What do we measure when we measure affective polarization?" (Druckman & Levendusky 2019). For the *commitment to democracy* measure, we use standard deviation of responses to the same question from March 2018 Pew survey. As we currently don't have any relevant references for importance variable, we plan to obtain an approximate guess in our pilot study. For now we assume the standard deviation for importance equals the average of the standard deviations of all other outcome variables. Standard deviations range between .73 and 1.

To calculate the minimum sample size necessary, we first use traditional power analysis for each partisan group and treatment arm. We take the largest standard deviation, and assume symmetrical effects for importance and democratic commitment variables, in order to attain 0.8 power with $\alpha = 0.05$, using a one-sided test, the minimum sample size necessary is $698 * 6 = 4188$.

As stated above, the above sample size calculation might be larger than required and once we conduct the pilot, we will re-run the power calculations using the updated standard deviation estimates from the pilot, so the sample size can be adjusted down or up although the estimate about expected effect size will still be set at 5%.

The survey is expected to take about 12 minutes and we plan to pay the subjects slightly more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of the average hourly rate is expected of cost around \$1. We would need about 300 subjects (50 people per partisan group/treatment arm) for the pilot, to get an accurate estimate for the standard deviation of the outcome variables.

For recruitment, we plan to use MTurk and will use several strategies to increase the quality of the sample. We will block users that use VPS/VPN and individuals with IP addresses outside of the United States from participating in the survey. To access a list of suspicious IP addresses, we will use IP hub (Kennedy et al 2019).

Estimation procedures

To calculate the conditional average treatment effect for each partisan group, we calculate the difference of means t-test in reported appropriateness, salience and trust measures for each partisan group separately. To analyze additional hypotheses with interaction variables, we use linear regression with robust standard errors.

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Appendix

Survey Wording:

Control	Partisan Opposition Treatment	Bipartisan Opposition Treatment
<p>WASHINGTON --President Trump has fired Michael Atkinson, the inspector general for the U.S. intelligence community who alerted Congress to concerns about a Trump phone call with the president of Ukraine—a matter that led to the president’s impeachment last year. Trump formally notified the intelligence committees of both the Senate and House in a letter that he “no longer” has the fullest confidence in Atkinson and would nominate a replacement “at a later time”. Trump has the authority to fire presidential appointees. However, past presidents have never fired an inspector general who had been investigating the president’s own conduct.</p>	<p>WASHINGTON --President Trump has fired Michael Atkinson, the inspector general for the U.S. intelligence community who alerted Congress to concerns about a Trump phone call with the president of Ukraine—a matter that led to the president’s impeachment last year. Trump formally notified the intelligence committees of both the Senate and House in a letter that he “no longer” has the fullest confidence in Atkinson and would nominate a replacement “at a later time”. Trump has the authority to fire presidential appointees. However, past presidents have never fired an inspector general who had been investigating the president’s own conduct.</p> <p>Democrats criticized the president’s decision. One Democratic member of Congress stated “Inspectors general should only be removed for reasons related to their performance to help preserve their independence. A general lack of confidence simply is not sufficient detail to satisfy Congress.” Another Democratic member of Congress stated that the decision was “a blatant attempt by the president to gut the independence of the intelligence community and retaliate against those who dare to expose presidential wrongdoing. It would have chilling effect against all willing to speak truth to power.”</p>	<p>WASHINGTON --President Trump has fired Michael Atkinson, the inspector general for the U.S. intelligence community who alerted Congress to concerns about a Trump phone call with the president of Ukraine—a matter that led to the president’s impeachment last year. Trump formally notified the intelligence committees of both the Senate and House in a letter that he “no longer” has the fullest confidence in Atkinson and would nominate a replacement “at a later time”. Trump has the authority to fire presidential appointees. However, past presidents have never fired an inspector general who had been investigating the president’s own conduct.</p> <p>Both Republicans and Democrats criticized the president’s decision. One Republican member of Congress stated “ Inspectors general should only be removed for reasons related to their performance to help preserve their independence. A general lack of confidence simply is not sufficient detail to satisfy Congress.” Meanwhile, a Democratic member of Congress stated that the decision was “a blatant attempt by the president to gut the independence of the intelligence community and retaliate against those who dare to expose presidential wrongdoing. It would have chilling effect against all willing to speak truth to power.”</p>

Auxiliary Hypotheses:

(1) Elite Reactions and Emotional Contagion:

One potentially interesting way in which democratic transgressions and elite opposition to democratic transgressions affect political outcomes is through their effect of emotions of different partisan group members. One common finding in the literature is that while they are

both negative emotions, anger has a distinct, politically mobilizing effect. Norm violations by politicians themselves can evoke anger in the citizens if they are perceived as disruptive especially among citizens that perceive the politician as out-group. Similar norm violations can fail to have such effect among the co-partisans of the politician, however, especially if the disruptive action is perceived as targeting out-group.

The effect of partisan reactions on emotions also likely operates through some different channels: elite opposition to democratic transgressions may increase the perception of injustice among the supporters of the opposition and thereby increase anger towards the violating politician. The emotional content of the elite messages might also matter, as there is some evidence of emotional contagion, elite anger is found to result in anger among the co-partisans of the elite (Masch 2020, Stapleton 2020). Elite opposition can conversely decrease anger if this gives co-partisans the sense that action has been taken against the transgression. As such we have two opposing predictions about the effect of partisan and bipartisan opposition on anger of the supporters of the opposition:

H9a: Opposition partisan pushback increases anger among citizens who support the opposition party.

H9b: Opposition partisan pushback decreases anger among citizens who support the opposition party.

H10a: Bipartisan pushback increases anger among citizens who support the opposition party

H10b: Bipartisan pushback decreases anger among citizens who support the opposition party

H11a: Opposition partisan pushback increases enthusiasm and pride among citizens who support the party of the President and decreases it among other citizens

H11b: Bipartisan pushback increases anger among citizens who support the party of the President

(2) Heterogeneous effects:

Since our treatments are taken from real articles and real events, individuals with high levels of political knowledge and political interest are more likely to have observed the real elite reactions before the treatment. So it is possible that we will observe elite effects only among the ones who have little interest and knowledge about political events. Likewise, we expect that people with low levels of political knowledge are more responsive to elite cues given they do not have entrenched political positions. This is

why, if there is any effect of elite cues on the evaluation of presidential transgressions, we should observe these among individuals that have low political knowledge and interest. The conditional effect of trust is less straightforward if the low political interest individuals also already have lower levels of trust in the political parties.

Political Knowledge H11: Among all subgroups, the effect of each treatment on perceived appropriateness/importance/commitment is larger for low political knowledge respondents.

Political Knowledge H12: Among all subgroups, the effect of each treatment on trust is larger for low political knowledge respondents and respondents with low political interest.

The prediction about the strength of partisanship among each partisan group is less straightforward:

Partisanship H13: Among Democrats, the effect of each treatment on perceived appropriateness/importance/commitment is larger for subjects with higher partisan attachment to Democratic party.

Partisanship H14: Among Democrats, the difference between the effects of partisan and bipartisan opposition is smaller for subjects with higher partisan attachment to Democratic party.

Partisanship H15: Among Republicans, the backlash effect of partisan is bigger for subjects with higher partisan attachment to Democratic party.

We do not have any clear expectations about how trust would change as individuals with stronger party attachment are more likely to have established views of their party. We are also agnostic as to what stronger partisan attachments entail for the trust in the president's party when co-partisan congress members criticize the president. The effects should be different for Pro-Trump Republicans and anti-Trump Republicans:

Pro_TrumpRepublicans H15: Among Republicans that approve of Trump, the backlash effect following partisan opposition on perceived appropriateness/importance/commitment is greater and the effect of bipartisan opposition on perceived appropriateness/importance/commitment is smaller than Republicans that don't approve of Trump and Republicans in general.

Pro_Trump Republicans H17: Among Republicans that approve of Trump, trust in both parties is less likely to increase following bipartisan opposition